

New Testament Lesson: Mark 12:38-44

Sermon Title: “Generosity that Challenges”

Back in September of 1997, a wealthy American businessman made international headlines by announcing that he was going to give one billion dollars in stocks over the next ten years to the United Nations. Do you remember who the man was? It was Ted Turner, the founder of CNN and former vice chairman of Time Warner Inc.

Now by anybody’s count, one billion dollars is a lot of money. But keep in mind that, at the time, Ted Turner was worth \$3.2 billion dollars. Turner said this about his gift: “It’s not a big deal.” He told Larry King: “I’m only giving up nine months’ earnings. . . . I’m no poorer than I was nine months ago and the world is a lot better off. I’ve still got two billion left. And maybe I can make some more and give some more away later.”¹

Now I thank God for the generosity of people like Ted Turner and other persons of wealth like Bill and Melinda Gates who created a foundation to help with global health care and education. They’re using their wealth to help people--and that’s a good thing. The size of their gifts are impressive and it’s no wonder that their giving makes headlines around the world!

But it does strike me as ironic that in a day and age when such staggering gifts are given, we’re sitting here on a Sunday morning remembering an old story about a poor Jewish widow donating two measly coins to the Temple treasury? We don’t even know the woman’s name!

So why are we doing this? Well, we’re doing this because this old story involves Jesus. Jesus is the one who puts the focus on this poor widow while there were wealthy people dropping large sums of money into the Temple treasury.

Maybe there’s something to be learned here about the true measure of generosity in the kingdom of God. Jesus said, *Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.*

¹ "Ted Turner's \$1 Billion Offer Lauded by U.N." *Supernews*. Reuters Limited, 1997. Web. 11 Oct. 2000.

Wow! It sounds to me like the measure of generosity in the kingdom of God is not the amount of the gift, but the degree of self-giving involved in the gift.

But please notice, while Jesus lifts up the generosity of the widow, he doesn't dismiss the gifts of the rich. He simply points out that the major characters are minor givers, while the minor character--the poor widow--is a major giver.

And notice this, the woman was giving to the Temple. This is a pretty amazing thing given the fact that in the verses immediately preceding this morning's text, Jesus warns the crowd about the scribes--the learned professionals of Judaism who functioned as record-keepers, lawyers, judges, and even financiers. They were a part of the Temple system. Jesus criticizes the scribes because *they devour widows' houses*. In other words, they were ripping off widows instead of protecting them. And yet this widow is giving everything she has to support this institution! Generosity has been known to produce some odd behaviors in people.

Notice one other thing: The measure of this woman's generosity is not the tithe. She didn't give just 10% of her income, or 20% or 50%. This poor widow woman gave 100% of what she had. She gave it all!

Now this makes me nervous. In fact, it scares me to death. This is generosity that challenges me. It challenges me because I can't imagine myself doing anything even close to what this woman did. In fact, I'm usually worried about giving too much away.

But on the other, there's a part of me that embraces this challenge because this story pushes me to look at my own values, my own attachments to money and things; it pushes me to reevaluate my own generosity in light of the kingdom. So I ask myself: How far am I willing to go? How generous will I be?

These are, I believe, profound spiritual questions. Pastor Cathy Tamsberg speaks for me when she writes: *Where I live, what I drive, what I eat, where I shop, what I wear, how I entertain myself...they all go to the core of what is important to me.*²

² Tamsberg, Rev. Cathy. "'All She Had to Live On' Extravagant Generosity Proper 27, Year B:

I don't know about you, but these are issues I need to wrestle with for the sake of my own soul and for the kingdom of God . And as I wrestle, it's important for me to remember that there are people who actually come close to the widow's level of generosity in their daily living.

For example, a husband and wife, who were traveling around the world, saw in Korea one day a boy pulling a crude plow in a field, while an old man held the plow handles and directed it through the rice paddy. The husband was amused by the sight and took a snapshot of the scene.

"That's very curious," he remarked to the missionary who was their interpreter and guide. "I suppose they are poor."

"Yes," said the missionary. "That is the family of Chi Noui. When the church was built they were eager to give something to it, but they had no money, so they sold the only ox they had and gave the money to the church. This spring they are pulling the plow themselves."

The husband and wife were silent. Then the wife said, "That was a real sacrifice."

"They did not call it that," said the missionary. "They thought it was fortunate they had an ox to sell."

The two tourists had not much to say, but when they reached home, they took the photograph to the church and told their pastor about the incident. "We want to double our pledge to the church," they said, "and give us some plow work to do. We never knew what gratitude or joy or sacrifice really meant until now."³

Pastoral Reflection." *North Carolina Council of Churches*. Web. 25 Nov. 2009.
<<http://www.nccouncilofchurches.org>>.

³ Andrews, Susan R. "Where Is Your Sadness?" *Speaking of stewardship model sermons on money and possessions*. Edited by Carter, William G. Louisville, Ky: Geneva, 1998. 80. Print.