



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

Living Large

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Mark 12.38-41

As Jesus taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in flashy garments, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long, elaborate prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

Jesus then sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "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 Peter 4.9-11

Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, employ it for one another as good stewards of God's various grace. If anyone speaks, she should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides.

Islam

Qur'an 3.92

You will not attain piety until you expend of what you love; and whatever thing you expend, God knows it.

Qur'an 4.36-37

Be kind to parents, and the near kinsman, and to orphans, and to the needy, and to the neighbor who is of kin, and to the neighbor who is a stranger, and to the companion at your side, and to the traveler, and to slaves that you own. Surely God loves not the proud and boastful who conceal the bounty that God has given them.

With this story of Jesus watching those coming and going in the temple we have another example of his making an important point with an exaggerated story. The woman in the story is most likely a composite of others who have given more than a fair share to the temple, but since no one can live by giving absolutely everything they have we look for deeper meaning in the story. The stark contrast between this woman, who is giving a larger portion of her wealth to the temple treasury, compared to

those who are giving more money but an amount that represents a significantly smaller amount of their income than this widow, is an important aspect of an abundant life.

But I don't think this is a story about money, per se. It is a story about large living. It is a story that commends to us the value of giving of ourselves to make the world a more equitable, kinder place for everyone to live. It is a story about living our lives generously and graciously based more on the sense of fulfilling our purpose in life than on our bragging rights or our display in order to feel justified in spending whatever is left on ourselves. That this woman gave out of her poverty is an indication of an attitude more than an amount. Her small coins belie her largess. Her humility and implied gratitude for all that she has stands in stark contrast to those who give large but live largely for themselves, thankful only that they are better than others. The paradox is that those who live large for self are small, while her small giving indicates large living at its best.

You may remember the joke about the three ministers who confided in one another as to how they divided up the offerings on Sunday between themselves and the church. One said that she kept one-tenth for herself and gave the rest to God. The second said that after the service he divided it up evenly: one for me, one for God. The third minister said that after the service he took the offering plates into his office, locked the door, and threw the money into the air. Whatever God can catch she can keep.

We chuckle, but the truth is that God doesn't take anything but leaves all of the money, all of the talent, all of the creativity, all of the knowledge to us as caretakers. We are responsible for its disbursement.

I'm often reminded of the words of Allen Stockdale at a manufacturer's convention:

God gave us a world unfinished so that we might share in the joys and satisfactions of creation.

God left the oil in Trenton rock. God left electricity in the clouds.

God left the rivers unbridged and the mountains untrailed.

He left the forest unfilled and the cities unbuilt. She left the diamonds uncut.

God left the music unsung and the dramas unplayed.

God left the poetry undreamed in order that people might not become bored but engaged in stimulating, exciting, creative activities that keep them thinking, working, experimenting, and experiencing all the joys and durable satisfactions of achievement.

God gave us the challenge of raw materials not the satisfaction of perfect, finished things.

Just as God left electricity in clouds for us to discover and harness, God left us with intelligence, creativity, money, time, and personality to use for our own pleasure as well as for the well-being of the world and the people around us. And paradoxically, using our gifts for others doesn't diminish our own pleasure. When we employ these gifts for others as well as our own edification, we are living large. To paraphrase Michelle Obama: Generosity goes high when stingy goes low.

Large living isn't about showing off but about finding the joy in life's experiences. It isn't about keeping track of how much we do or how much we give but about how much we enjoy giving and how much we enjoy doing.

Popular financial advisor and television guru Suze Orman in her book *Nine Steps to Financial Freedom* speaks about this from an economical perspective as well. “Having money,” she says “is like using your hands to get a drink of water from the faucet: if you keep a tight grip on your hands, you won’t get any. You must open your hands for any to stay in your palms if you want a drink.” “Financial freedom,” she posits, “is found by sharing with others.”

“Decide on an amount of time, or energy, or money you feel you can give away freely each month,” she continues. “Let your inner voice determine the amount you should make as an offering. All that matters is that what you give away be meaningful to you and that it be given with thought, humility and gratitude. You must not give less than your inner voice tells you is the meaningful amount, for that is being cheap. Nor must you give more than you can afford, for that is not being responsible to yourself and your resources.” This is the joy of living large and what, I think, Jesus might have admired in the woman who gave the small coins.

Do you remember the story of The Robin Hood restaurant in Madrid? It is a place of welcome, inclusion, and nutritious food for those who can’t afford it. The mission of the restaurant, a la Robin Hood, is to charge the rich and feed the poor. Paying customers at breakfast and lunch pay a bit more for their food so the restaurant can serve dinner to the homeless people, free of charge. It is an invitation to the ‘haves’ in Madrid to live large for the ‘have nots.’ It has become one of Spain’s most sought-after lunch reservation. Staff from other luxury hotels and celebrity chefs volunteer to cook once a week and in so doing live large in a new way.

If we can learn to be generous in the small interactions within families on the day-to-day basis, we will develop the habits that sustain us in the more emotionally intense times when generosity becomes the catalyst for peace and harmony. The reverse can also be true. A commitment to be generous in an intense time can set the stage for forgiveness and healing and enable a new dynamic for the future. (L. Gregory Jones) This is the challenge to those of us who are learning to live large by being stewards of what has been entrusted to us. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

Once again, O God, we gather in this place to center our minds and focus our hearts on things that matter, and to give thanks at this special season of the year. With all of its sham and drudgery, its broken dreams and conflicting voices, its violence and hatred, it is still a beautiful world. We thank you for the blessings of the week past, for the sun overhead even when we couldn't see it; for stars that shone at night, even when clouds blocked our view; and even for the cold and dark dreariness of winter, punctuated by the brilliance of white snow without which there would be no spring flowers. We thank you for bitter medicine and painful surgeries that heal; for the misfortunes without which we could never grow wise or know the meaning of true joy. Life is a mystery, and you, dear God, are the biggest mystery of all, for which we give thanks.

In the coming week, keep us unfaltering in our hope, affectionate in our love and kindness, and faithful to our calling to enjoy life as we give opportunities for others to enjoy life. Keep us humble that we may continue to grow in our understanding of ourselves and the people around us. Keep us joyful that even amid pain and sorrow we will find peace. Keep our eyes open, our ears alert, and our hands and feet ready to respond to the needs of others even while we find our rest in you.

Hear our prayer for those who are cold and hungry, that they may be fed. Grateful for agencies and people who keep them going so those without can have something to sustain them. Hear our prayers for the weary and heavy-laden that they may find peace. Hear our prayers for the sick, the homebound, and the grieving that they may be comforted. And we pray for those who are wronged by social systems, leaders, and laws that they may not be diminished by bitterness.

We grieve the sad situation of those who have had to flee with their lives from their native country only to find an unwelcoming neighbor who has built walls rather than bridges. And we pray also for those who are enduring the holocaust of flames that have destroyed lives and property in one fell swoop. We offer our support of money and prayers through those who are assisting with the fallout of the disaster.

Remind us that we are loved for being who we are, even as we are loved in spite of who we are. Give us courage to act justly, to advocate for those who cannot speak for themselves, to give ourselves over to living large by our generosity of spirit and deed. In the name of the one who calls us, Amen.