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*Two Interesting Stories About Money and Giving*

Matthew 17:24-27 and Mark 12:41-44 (Temple Tax and Widow's Mite)

Commitment Sunday

November 17, 2019

We have two very interesting little stories today to ponder on this, our Commitment Sunday, when we as members seek to discern what God is calling us to give of our treasure in the coming year. The first one reminds me of a texting conversation I had earlier this fall with my cosmetologist daughter, Madeleine, who works at the Great Clips in Olathe. Apparently one day she received a prayer instead of a tip. Her client was a little boy who was there with his grandma, and instead of tipping her, the grandma said, "The Lord was speaking to me as you were cutting his hair." I said to Madeleine, mildly outraged on her behalf, "No She wasn't. If God was speaking, She would have told that grandma to leave a tip!" Madeleine replied, "Agreed! Prayers do not pay my bills." Which is true for all of us . . . the grocery store, the bank, and the utility companies do not accept prayers for payment in lieu of actual money.

Gifts of time and talent are foundational to any congregation, but even Jesus understands that there are times when nothing but actual money will do. If anybody had a good excuse not to pay the temple tax, it would be Jesus, who gave the ultimate sacrifice in giving his life. But even Jesus kicked in financially to help support the temple, not because he had to, but because he chose to. Peter, it's not a big deal—just go fishing and let's take care of it.

Well, thankfully, there are no taxes in church. We do not charge to come and worship, to receive communion, or to come sort food for the Harvest Offering. But it does cost money to have a church building, and to do ministry. And there are always great reasons not to give more than we do. For example, maybe we want to see the church do a better job of caring for people in need in our neighborhood, and until the church does that, we would rather give directly to the

Rescue Mission and Doorstep and Let's Help. Isn't that the same or better than giving to the church, some might argue. When the church does more of the things we want, then we will give more. That's a common reason.

Or maybe we've got so many financial obligations it's overwhelming—and surely God understands if we don't give our money right now. I have certainly had times in my life when I felt I just could not give it. And yet when I look back, I can see that I was tightly clutching what I had out of fear, not faith, and I probably could have given, and it would have blessed me to have done so.

I'm in a Facebook group for Presbyterian church leaders, and I was intrigued to learn that a few of my fellow pastors deduct their student loan payments from their giving to their church, because it's money they've had to pay in order to be able to serve. I thought, wow, I have really missed the boat on that one! I could start giving myself credit for an extra thousand dollars a year with that thinking, since I'm still paying a small amount each month for my M.Div.

The problem is, the church can't use my student loan payments, or my fear, or my reasons that are often just an excuse to spend more money on myself, to pay the electric bill, or the piano tuner, or cover anybody's salary. Some things just require actual money, and plenty of it. So when I tithe ten percent of each paycheck to the church, I will pay it all in actual money, because factoring in a student loan simply will not give me the same feeling of joy and peace and freedom that giving a full ten percent of my paycheck does.

On the back of the stewardship brochures that we mailed out last week, the chart on the back states that over 100 families or individuals who belong to the church pledge no money at all. However, that's because we still have many people on our rolls who are very minimally involved in the life of the church. Those of you who are involved GIVE, not only time and

talent, but money, and many of you have steadily increased your giving over the past several years. Right now we are surrounded by generous givers. This is a big reason that during this challenging time when so many mainline churches are shutting down, WE are dreaming new dreams and seeing new visions for ministry, and we are doing it in this gorgeous place that is also beautifully maintained, warm and welcoming in this cold time of year. Thanks be to God!

Money matters. Money gets things done. So that makes our second story today particularly interesting. Oh, how I wish we had more of this story. A widow—a POOR widow—drops two coins, worth a penny, into one of the Temple treasury containers. WHY?

It's not like these coins will accomplish anything. Probably won't even buy a stick of incense. In fact, one could argue she's not really sacrificing much because those two little coins aren't enough to live on anyway, not even for a day.

Maybe when you're down to almost nothing, you get a bigger bang for your coin by giving it away in the service of something bigger than yourself, than you do in hanging on to it. Maybe the widow's situation was so precarious, that giving the two little coins she had left felt like a way to reclaim some dignity. Or maybe it really was a way to put her trust in God into action—"God, you see my need, and what little I have left I offer to you. My life is in your hands." I keep picturing that scene from the movie *Castaway*, where Tom Hanks is stranded for four years on a desert island, and then he makes a raft and sails away in the hope of being rescued, and finally, when it seems that all hope of rescue is gone, he just lets go of his oars, and gives himself up.

What's interesting is that in this brief little vignette, Jesus only observes. He does not criticize the wealthy for not giving more, and he does not praise the destitute widow for giving the scraps she has left. He is teaching his followers how to see. Do you SEE that widow—this

tiny amount she has offered, so tiny that it accomplishes virtually nothing, has made the bigger contribution because in that gift, she gave her whole life, which is something Jesus himself is preparing to do. And I just hate it that we don't know what happened to that widow after she gave her gift—was she an older widow, did she just go home and die? Did she HAVE a home to go to? Did any of the wealthy people who gave large sums to the temple notice what she was doing and give something to her and would she have accepted it if they had? Did Jesus speak to her or greet her or help her in any way, because the Gospel of Mark doesn't say? What did she feel after she gave her coins? How did God come through for her? Was there some sort of eventual rescue for her, as there was for the Tom Hanks character in *Castaway*? Did the leaders of the temple ever find out what this widow had done, and if so, how did they respond?

Last Sunday, the choir and several church members and I all went to Overland Park to be part of the celebration of the Korean American Society's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. A couple Sundays ago, Song Yi shared that our church sent some of the very first missionaries to Korea more than a hundred years ago. When I say sent, I mean that the members of this church provided all of their financial support—no small thing. The work of those missionaries led to the development of churches in South Korea that are still going strong today, and it opened the doors for Korean people to come to Kansas. As part of this celebration, our church was given a special letter of appreciation, along with a scholarship check for \$5000, which is intended as a recurring gift.

I was shocked by the amount—I knew we were going to receive something, but not \$5000. But even with that generous amount, it was the intent behind the gift that made it so precious. As I said to them last Sunday, as generous as the gift was, the appreciation and encouragement behind the gift, and the way it encourages and inspires us here today to keep persevering in ministry, is FAR, far more valuable than \$5,000. When we feel discouraged as a

church because we aren't the prominent, prestigious institution we used to be, we dare not give up or waste our time bemoaning the good old days. Because people a hundred years from now are counting on us to persevere today.

When we put together the story of the Jesus and the temple tax, and the story of the widow and the two small coins, and hold them up in the light of stewardship and Commitment Sunday, one takeaway is: it takes money to have a church. Even Jesus supported giving cold, hard cash to the temple. Large sums of money from people with the ability to give them are a wonderful gift, and so are small coins from people who do not know where their next meal is coming from. My prayer is that each of us will prayerfully make our pledge of money, that each of us is moving towards a tithe or beyond as we are able, that the amount will be one that both challenges us and brings us joy. And that for each of us, the love and the trust behind our gift is even greater than the gift itself. Amen.