



SERMON

Giving in His Name

Isaiah 6:1-8 and Mark 12:28-34, 41-44

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Skyline Presbyterian Church

You knew sooner or later, the church would get around to talking about money. And here we go...

Actually this attitude is set on a false foundation. It's a little bit like saying, "Sooner or later you just know the church will get around to loving God...or Jesus' love for us...or prayer...or spiritual growth." Unless we get this right together, I'm going to preach about stewardship, that is, what we do with what we've got, and you're going to endure it, ignore it, and then get on with it.

What I want to do instead is help us remember the generosity of God and think about our thankful response.

Before I take us into the scriptures for this morning I want us to first take a glimpse into our own contemporary culture. This week I looked at a recent analysis of per person charitable contributions by state. Massachusetts, with the fourth highest personal income in the country, ranked last in charitable contributions as a percentage of personal income. Mississippi, forty-ninth in income, ranked first in the highest percentage of personal income given to charities. This is helpful to note because in actual dollars, Massachusetts gave more than forty percent more than their Mississippi counterparts. There is more to know than just the bottom line. So, what's going on?

I want to be careful to remind us that it is dangerous to make caricatures of people based on their income and their apparent choices. Some people contribute generously to religious institutions. Look at the parade of wealthy donors in today's Gospel. Mark makes a point of noting the sheer size of their gifts. Some poor people give very little. The widow in our story drops in two tiny coins—a pittance, really. Who are we to judge the circumstances, motives, and values of anyone who gives or doesn't give to the church? Only God can see into the heart and know what's there.

And there's the rub. God can and does see into the heart and knows what's there.

Jesus looks at the wealthy givers and sees them giving off the top of their deep and overflowing pockets. Moreover, He sees them giving in order to appear generous and charitable, whereas in fact they might never miss the amount they contribute. An unspoken corollary to this observation then arises. If they give such a small percentage of their wealth to the Lord, do they also give a small percentage of their time, their influence, their heart?

Jesus' comments about the Temple scribes only increase our unease. Surely they, of all people, would be digging deep into the pockets of their souls as well as of their robes! Their lives, as well as their gifts, need to display the great commandments to love God with their whole heart, mind, soul and strength, and their neighbors as themselves. After all, haven't they dedicated their lives to the service of God and His people? Yet in verses 38-40 Jesus says of them, "They like to walk around in long robes, and 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 prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

This, my friends, is frightening. However much we may disapprove of wealthy people who give little to charity, especially religious charity, it is disconcerting to hear Jesus' condemnation of those who give much in actual coinage to those very causes. It's as if He is laying into those Massachusetts residents who are giving generously, who are outstripping their Mississippi cousins! It's as if He is laying into people who struggle with mortgages, tuition, medical bills and all the rest. Surely He's not asking us to give more to the church? Surely we can't spend all our time as volunteers in a food pantry or homeless shelter! We give what we can and we do what we can; what more could Jesus ask of us?

We hear His approval of the widow who gave all she had to live on and we feel more aligned with the rich young ruler back in chapter ten, who, when Jesus told him: "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor...", went away grieving because he had many possessions and couldn't part with them even for the sake of Jesus and the life Jesus offered.

C.S. Lewis wrote that Christian charity is neither "Christian" nor "charity" unless our giving impacts our lifestyle and causes us to sacrifice some needs as well as luxuries. Certainly our faith establishes God's expectation of tithing, in which one gives 5% or 10% of one's income to the church. I don't really think the question of percentages satisfies the soul. It has to do with the dedication of our hearts. In general, if you wonder whether you're giving enough, the safest bet is to assume you could do more, and then try to do just that. Seek the Lord's guidance, stretch yourself in terms of how much you give to the Lord's work and then sustain it.

The woman Jesus observed placing her small amount of money into the offering didn't give in order to get anything, nor did she give because she had gotten anything from the temple's ministry. She gave as an act of devotion to her Lord. Her giving was a humble outward expression of her heart's gratitude. Her gift was so humble that nobody knew its magnitude... except her Lord. She is what we are called to be: people whose giving is an outward expression of our hearts' attitudes.

Because of our Lord's lavish self-giving of all His wealth, that His life, power, authority, holiness, everything, even destitute widows are freed to give themselves recklessly and beautifully into His wounded hands. Because of Jesus' self-emptying, even pompous scribes and self-satisfied fat-cats might be freed to pour out their bounty of wealth in self-forgetful gratitude. Awash in the incredible riches of God's outpoured and forgiving love, even we anxious, harried and, let's admit it, self-centered folk might cease from saying, "My money. My time. My talents, interests, and gifts. My life" We might even dare to believe the last line of that beautiful song Larry sang for us this morning, "Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small. Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all"

Our Lord spent Himself on us so, whether we're from Massachusetts or Mississippi, the equation becomes the same when our lives are immersed in Him. Everything, however little or great, everything is not ours but given in His name.

We each have a question to answer this week. "What percentage of my income is the Lord calling me to give to Him through my church this next year?" And to help us know whether we've got our right answer we can answer a couple of other questions. Does my answer stretch my discipleship? Does it truly reflect my heart's devotion and trust in Him?