

“Consecrate and Bless”

Mark 12.38–44

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 23 Nov 03

It’s a setup, isn’t it?! Jesus is at it again, as he often is, knocking the good old scribes and Pharisees. “They like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect ... and to have the best seats in the synagogues.”

I find that a little difficult, since I’m up here in a long robe, and I’ve been greeted this morning with hopefully a modicum of respect, and I have the best seat in the house! Don’t you ever feel more like a Pharisee who makes a good effort, rather than a poor widow, willing to give up absolutely everything?

One of the things I love about the unvarnished sayings of Jesus is that they push me out of my comfort zone; they reveal some of my growing edges – the places where I need to expand my spiritual and ethical horizons. And this is one of those places for me, and I’ll bet for some of you.

In this story of “the widow’s mite,” Jesus says that the woman has put in more than anyone else, even though it is only two cents. It’s that type of counterintuitive statement that Jesus is famous for: small things are really big things; the first shall be last and the last shall be first. And it’s that same sort of paradox that Francis of Assisi offers in his famous prayer: “It is in giving that we receive; in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

But, let’s dig into the story a bit deeper. One of the amazing things about the widow’s gift is that she gives up all her worldly security. That’s not necessarily a reasonable or a logical thing to do. Any financial planner worth his or her salt will not advise you to dump all of your assets into the coffers of Plymouth Congregational. But, the woman is not using the conventional wisdom of a financial planner, but rather the subversive wisdom that is lifted up by Jesus. This woman has to be a little bit crazy, don’t you think, to give up any semblance of security? Maybe, maybe not.

Why do you think she does this? She surely could have used the money for food or shelter. I would suggest to you that she gives because of her own deep need to give.

It’s not about the recipient; it’s all about the giver.

What does she get out of the act of giving? Does she get a visible reward (like the scribes who are greeted with honor or who get the comfortable seats)? No. Does she get a solid financial return on her investment? No. She *does* get the admiration of Jesus who lifts her up as the example, and he does this because ***she fully puts her trust in God’s abundance.*** That’s what she receives: faith!

Do this with me if you will: take out a bill or a coin. Look to see what theological statement we put on our money. [pause] Isn’t it something of a paradox that we inscribe the words “In God We Trust” on our coins and currency? Do we *really* trust in God, as the widow did, or are we more apt to look at money as a source of security? How does that play out in your own life? Where do you derive *real* security? What does it look like to trust in God? Can you think of a time when you’ve really gone out on a limb because you were willing to trust God? That kind of security without safety net is just what the gospel writers were trying to convey when they told the tale about Peter walking out on the water to join Jesus. He takes a few faltering steps, then feels his ankles getting wet, panics, and starts to sink. We are called to trust God fully.



When I was doing my field work in divinity school with the Franciscan AIDS Ministry in Denver, I became acquainted with the writings of brilliant Jesuit from India, named Anthony de Mello. He had the amazing ability to spin quips and aphorisms – as Jesus did – that turn things upside down or cause you to think about things in new ways.

De Mello writes, “We sanctify whatever we are grateful for.” In other words, we make holy whatever we’re thankful for.

Think about that in your own life: what are you grateful for, and how does your sense of gratitude sanctify it?

Will you spend a moment with me, close your eyes if you wish, and just think about what you are grateful for, and ask for God’s blessing upon those people, things, or aspects of your very existence. [pause]

“We sanctify whatever we are grateful for.” We might just as well say that we **consecrate** whatever we are grateful for. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the verb “consecrate” this way: “to set apart as sacred; to dedicate solemnly to a sacred or religious purpose; or to give sacramental character by performing the appropriate rite.”

In a few minutes, we will do that: we’ll bring our offerings and our pledge cards, and our time & talent forms forward, putting them in the baskets, and then together we will ask for God’s blessing. This is the same sort of thing I do when we celebrate communion, and I consecrate the elements by setting them apart and dedicate them to a sacred purpose.



But, I’m going to return to that widow for a moment...it isn’t the *result* of her giving that’s important: it’s the process. ***It isn’t the recipient – but the giver – who is changed by her generosity.***

So, how are we called to respond to God’s generosity? Do you know that wonderful hymn in the *New Century Hymnal*, “God of the Sparrow, God of the Whale?” “How does the creature say grace? How does the creature say thanks?” I don’t know how most creatures express their gratitude (my golden retriever Kobi expresses thanks by slobbering on people), but we can do it by passing along God’s blessing to others. We can respond by answering the call to be co-creators of the kingdom of God here and now. Among the substantial ways we can do that is through our financial gifts.

We don’t do what some denominations do: demand a ten-percent tithe no matter what. That doesn’t let the giver decide about the gift: it deprives us of the spirit of generosity. So, what do you think is a generous percentage of your gross income to share in being co-creators of the kingdom of God? Nobody is going to quiz you about this, but I’d like you think to yourself what percentage of your income you are willing to commit to God’s work through your community of faith. For the widow, the answer was 100 percent. It makes a ten-percent tithe in our affluent culture seem almost paltry, doesn’t it?

You know, I used to think that ministers didn’t give to the church: that they “gave at the office,” so to speak. **Wrong!** As part of my ministry in Connecticut, I preached on stewardship in churches all over the state, and as I did so, Jean’s and my giving went up substantially. And when we came to Ft. Collins last year, our giving took another leap, and we’re increasing our pledge this year to nine-point-something percent of our gross income. I think part of that can be explained by having a close-up view of the needs both of the local church and the wider church: that wonderful things are happening here at Plymouth; that the UCC that exists beyond the four walls of this sanctuary; and that we have a lot to be grateful for; and we feel the need and the joy to respond to God’s extravagant abundance in our lives.

I invite you into a time of silent prayer and reflection on how you can use the gifts that God has entrusted to you. Then if you are so moved, you may fill in a pledge card (the ushers have extras, in case you forgot yours). After which the ushers will invite you forward to bring your pledge card, time & talent survey, and any offering you have this morning forward.

Let us be in prayer...