



A WORTHY WITNESS
Mark 12:38-44

Last year, Pastor Ray told a story at the 8:30 a.m. service about two men from Lancaster County who became shipwrecked on a deserted island. A few days went by – and no hopes for being rescued. One of them became very agitated and then fearful. The other man made a make-shift fishing pole and was calmly fishing. This was more than the first fellow could take. He shouted out, “Why aren’t you more concerned? The water is beginning to rise. This could be our demise.” The other man responded, “Don’t worry. Everything will be okay. I attend Evangelical United Methodist Church of New Holland. Last fall I promised to give a double tithe to my church. Relax; Pastor Eric will soon be here to get me.” We preachers take a lot of ribbing about money and finances.

In my first appointment as a student pastor – I served two churches outside Hazelton, PA – Weatherly and Beaver Meadows. I needed some gas for the car – so I stopped at the only station in town to fill up. The total came to \$5.00. I went to reach for my billfold - I had left it at home. Mary had a diaper bag – but no pocketbook. It was an awkward moment. The owner said, “No problem, Pastor. I belong to your church. I will just take my pay in sermons.” Well, Mary came to my defense and said, “My husband does not preach \$5.00 sermons.” The man said, “**I know. I’ll come twice.**”

Well, today’s sermon is about wealth and giving. I hope it is worth more than \$2.50.

After a series of intense encounters with the religious authorities in **Mark 12** – Jesus seeks a moment of rest and renewal. Jesus takes a seat in the Temple where he is able to observe the faithful place their offerings for the work of the Temple.

According to Dr. William Barclay there were 13 collecting boxes (and you though we had a lot of offerings). They were called ‘trumpets’ because they were so shaped.¹

Jesus was raised and nurtured in the most tithe-conscious generation of people ever to live on the face of the earth. It was an essential part of covenantal living.

The religious teachers often challenged or raised issue with how Jesus did things – but they never accused Jesus of failing to offer his tithe to God. Jesus never spoke a word against it. As a matter of fact, you could make the case it was not enough. Jesus said the disciples’ righteousness should exceed that of the Pharisees.

I have learned from 32 years of pastoring that Christian giving has more to do with a full heart than a full checkbook.

Jesus could have instructed this widow to give one coin and keep one coin for herself. This widow lived closer to the bottom line than many of us here today. However – unlike the rich young ruler we studied about 3 Sundays ago – this dear woman did not go away sad when she gave her gift. Jesus holds her up as a worthy witness. Her gift was the largest in faithfulness and trust. Her gift was the largest in spirit and in truth. That is why it is a worthy witness and model for all of us to follow. My good friend Laverne – before her death – gave 13% of her modest income to the church and missionaries support.

As I begin my sermon today – I already know that what I have to preach will be on a direct collision course with what you will hear outside these church walls.

Dr. Robert Coles is a brilliant child psychologist who teaches at Harvard University. He shares a true story about a child that describes the conflict of values between the Jesus Way and the world's values.

A young child was born into a wealthy family. They raised him in the Christian faith – so he attended Sunday School and VBS. The youngster was extremely attentive to the teachings of Jesus. He often talked about Jesus – and this began to upset his teachers – fellow students – and eventually his parents. He became concerned about the amount of wealth his parents and friends had – and the need that existed in the world. It created tension and not peace.

Dr. Coles shared that this created real problems for the youngster. His parents had to place him in psychotherapy. They were advised to have him stop reading the Bible and going to church. He was diagnosed as being too 'literal-minded.' Dr. Coles finished the story by reporting the child was eventually 'cured' of his Christian outlook – and became 'normal' like everyone else.

Jesus knew that the heart of this dear woman was not normal – but was a heart set free to truly love God with all her heart, mind, soul and strength. She knew the coins did not belong to Caesar – but to her citizenship in heaven. She knew that God was the owner of her vineyard – so she was faithful to this trust. She had heard this message loud and clear. This woman loved God and his Temple – despite all its flaws and warts. This woman's life was not dominated or dehumanized by the seduction of money. Within every soul is the need to give. When we respond to this instinct – our giving is an expression of our loving. Stop giving – and you stop loving.

It was unfortunate that the child's psychiatrist had not read the works of the distinguished Swedish psychiatrist, Dr. Paul Tourier, who discovered, "Healthy people are giving people."

People need to give gifts,” he discovered, “because they need to give of themselves.” Amy Carmichael, the late missionary to India, wrote, “You can give without loving – but you cannot love without giving.”

My good friend Dr. Thomas Lane Butts shares the story told in a poem format of six people who froze to death around a campfire on a bitterly cold night. Each had a stick of wood they may have contributed to the fire, but for reasons satisfactory to themselves each person refused to give what they had.

A woman would not give her stick of wood because there was an Afro-American person in the circle. A homeless man would not give because there was a rich man there. The rich man would not give because his contribution would warm someone who was obviously shiftless and lazy. Another would not give his stick when he recognized one not of his particular religious faith. The Afro-American man withheld his piece of wood as a way of getting even with the whites for all they had done to him and his race. And, the fire died as each person withheld their piece of fuel for reasons justifiable to them. The poem ends with these tragic lines:

**“Six logs held fast in death’s still hand was proof of
human sin;
They did not die from the cold without; they died from
the cold within.”²**

However, she knew her worth as a person came from the values and principles that she had learned from the Temple. To have withheld her gift would have really been a way of leaving out herself. For the widow, her giving at the Temple was not a chore, but a cherished opportunity to express her faith in God.

She did not throw it in the box grudgingly and walk away in a huff. She knew that being a part of God’s work was not a burden, but a blessing. She was free to love God.

Evangelical United Methodist Church of New Holland, PA, will never die from a lack of resources – but from resources which freeze our faith. When you give, you light the fire of faith in your life. May our giving be a cherished opportunity to love God. We are to trust God and use money – not use God and trust money. There is a direct connection between our understanding of money and the spiritual life – where our treasures are.

Today, I want to share another story of one who gave out of faithfulness and spirit. This story should be well known to every Pennsylvanian. Like the widow – her status and size of gift was quite small. She was from a poor family in North Philadelphia. When she died tragically as a youngster, 57 pennies were found under her pillow. However, those 57 pennies were used by God to touch millions.

It seems the little girl tried to attend a Sunday School at the Little Temple Baptist Church. She was turned away because there was no room for her. She began saving

pennies in order to help the Sunday School have more room – so she and others could go to Sunday School.

The story was told to the pastor of the church, Rev. Russell H. Conwell. He also wrote the famous lecture and book **“Acres of Diamonds.”** Pastor Conwell told the heartbreaking story to his congregation - and the Philly newspapers picked up the story. The small and humble gift of 57 cents sparked an avalanche of giving that produced Temple University – Temple Hospital – and the Conwell School of Theology which later moved to Boston to form the Gordon-Conwell School of Theology.

Imagine if the small girl had withheld her small stick of 57 pennies because she was not allowed to attend the Sunday School class. Now you understand why Jesus said in **Mark 10:14**, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”

When it comes to wealth and money – we must follow the way and truth God has revealed to us in Christ Jesus. As **Proverbs 3:6** shares “In all your ways acknowledge him – and he will direct your paths.”

Every year at this time the hard-working Finance Committee is laboring, preparing the budget for 2010. As I share with you every year – it is written in a foreign language – dollars and cents. However, that foreign language translates to ministry and mission in the name of the Risen Christ. We try to be ‘good stewards’ of the resources committed to our care. The Committee looks at salaries, health insurance, building maintenance, utility costs, repairs, missions, worship, education. The committee has already frozen salaries for 2010 – and asked all work areas to do the same. We are fortunate that so far we have not had to lay off staff or cut out programs as many churches have had to do.

A Finance Committee always has a two-fold task – we must think spiritually, but also numerically. There is a whole book of the Bible called **Numbers**. Accurate arithmetic is an aspect of becoming the people of God. Wise discipline is required in becoming a people of God. While numbers and finances require some less-than-fun details of community life – they are still essential to our life together.³ The committee can only commit that which you give to us to work and witness with.

The Psalm appointed for today is **Psalm 127**. This great Psalm reminds us that “unless the Lord builds the house – those who do so labor in vain.” Remember – building this house is also about living out our Mission Statement “bringing people into the life-changing presence of Jesus Christ.” That is stewardship as well. Your stewardship of worship and study here each week is crucial. Unlike the recent balloon boy scare and scam – we don’t have the luxury of being filled with hot air. The Holy Spirit must fill this house – unless we build it in vain.

Giving – like ‘joy’ – is an infallible proof of being touched by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. In this house the wealthy and the widows must join hands

and follow the blessed example of our Lord – who was rich – but yet for our sakes became poor. **John 3:16** points the way, “God so loved the world that He gave”

May we do the same!

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
November 8, 2009 – 10:30 a.m. service only
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ENDNOTES

¹ William Barclay, **“The Daily Study Bible, THE GOSPEL OF MARK,”** revised edition, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1975, page 302.

² Thanks to my friend and mentor, Dr. Thomas Lane Butts of Monroeville, Alabama for this marvelous instruction.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with Its Translator,** NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 191.