

Psalm 126
Mark 12:38-44

The Sacrificial Gift
Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church

March 19, 2023

There could be someone – present on watching this on their computer screen at some point, who doesn't know me or why Pastor Takako asked me to preach today. In case that's true, I am a retired pastor, and one of the aspects of Christian Life that has been important to me is what churches call "Stewardship" – a word that means care of what is not really ours, but has been put into our hands to tend and care and manage. Presbyterians believe that ALL things are actually God's, some of it given to us to protect and use wisely. When we talk about stewardship in our time in history, that usually means money are property. At our annual congregational meeting, I asked y'all to keep giving in your offering to the church as you have been into March, because we were going to make some changes to Stewardship program, and we would talk about it then. And here we are, it is March!

Stewardship is not a common word anymore, and we have already been using the language: Grace and Gratitude. That is – Grace being the everything that God gives to us, and Gratitude as our thankfulness for God's love and care for us. Your church Session approved the new plan and calendar. Calendar being – we're going to think of our Grace and Gratitude annual year as starting in March (like good New Mexicans we're already a couple of weeks late) instead of January. And the Grace and Gratitude (Stewardship committee will focus on different themes about God's gifts and our care of them, in 3 month segments. We'll see how this goes.

One thing that hasn't changed is that it is up to us to keep care of this church, our church, God's church, and that takes 3 or 4 things – money (obviously), skills and talents (and *everybody* has something they can do or are good at, they know something about), and time. Your involvement and presence in this church is part of what we all give.

So for starters, here's my favorite Stewardship joke:

Edgar and Wilbur were two New Hampshire farmers, up there in New England, and Wilbur went down to Boston to a conference on Socialism. When he came back he was trying to explain it to Edgar. He said, "It's like this. Say... you have two houses and I had no house at all, you might let me live in one of yours." 'I guess that makes sense,' says Edgar. Wilbur goes on, "And if you had two cars and I don't have any, you'd let me drive one of yours." Edgar says, more cautiously, 'Wellll... yeah, I can see that. Okay.' "Wilbur continues: "And if you have two hogs, and..." 'Damn, you Wilbur, you *know* I got two hogs!'

In our Gospel lesson from Mark 12, Jesus is advising his followers to beware of the religious professionals, the Scribes, who dressed up fancy and walked around with a self-important attitude, and talked the poor out of what money that had. By contrast, Jesus had his disciples observe a poor widow, who made her temple offering 2 small copper coins – everything she had, everything she had to *live* on.

Was hers a sacrificial offering or a suicidal one? Episcopal writer Sarah Dylan Brewer wrote: “Where is there any suggestion at all in the text that Jesus thinks this is a wonderful thing that this poor widow put her last two coppers in the Temple treasury? The text suggests just the opposite.”¹ Martyrdom is not a recommended practice.

Jesus was denouncing, in this whole section, the arrogant pretensions of the scribes and the Pharisees – denouncing those who stole from the livelihood of people like this poor widow. He certainly didn’t want her to do it to herself. The Temple was corrupt, and very likely her offering would have been used for something of far less human value than her feeding herself – perhaps for the scribes to put on fancy gowns and banquets. In the culture of that time, women only had rights by virtue of their association with a male relative. So she was not so much a poor widow, rather she was poor *because* she was a widow. There is in this passage no celebration of poverty, no romantic notion about it, and no assertion that physical well-being doesn’t matter. It does. The point is not that the widow had made herself poor and this was somehow noble, but that she had been made poor by a corrupt system, yet still placed her trust in God. Jesus called attention to her offering less to point out her giving itself than to point to the sin of the scribes – who were the legal experts and scholars of the religious law, among the Pharisees.

And yet, too often this passage is preached in stewardship season – yes, like today – in a way that comes dangerously close to putting the church in the role of the Temple treasury. The church should be the *last* organization that asks the most economically vulnerable to give the *most*. We are not in spiritual competition with the poor widow of the parable. In fact, we should be infuriated by any system that takes away the property of the poor to give it to those whose only motivation is greed.

Jesus’ attack on the scribes was not a critique of Jewish religion or Jewish practices, but an attack on greed that pretended at be religious. It was not a critique of the rich who had given a great deal into the offering. It was simply an example that they had not given in ways that crippled the livelihood of themselves or their dependents, as the poor widow had done.

What was commendable about the widow’s offering was that it was a gift of her whole heart. She acted on her deepest beliefs – whatever that was which gave rise to her Sacrificial Gift. She gave it all, left it all on the field (as football fans would say), in an ultimate act of faith. Just as Jesus was going to do, even as he sat with the disciples and pointed out her action. He was going to leave it all on the Cross and trust in God. He pointed to the widow at the Temple for example, and in her action she pointed to him, though she may have never known it.

She trusted that in the end it is God’s world – a world, by the way, that God made and called good and gave to us, and blesses, and fills with holy providence. We are totally dependent on God for even the basics of day-to-day life, whether we know it or not. That is not to demean or diminish our work, or its importance, but to say that God is at work in our work, was in our lives before we even showed up. So pray this: *They will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. We may *not* change everything, in the great scheme of things. But *we* will be changed, in being faithful. Your giving does not need to be, should *not* be, suicidal. But it can be sacrificial enough, and even startle you enough, to know that a) God is in it, and b) you are following Jesus on the way.

We are a small church, as you know, and not a wealthy church. We have to do for ourselves, trusting always in God. But we have this – we have trust in God and we have each other. That is, we are family. This is our spiritual home, look around you at your brothers and sisters in Christ. We are in this together, and God is with us.

Pledge cards. You can turn one in – they are helpful to your Session in planning. But mainly it is a reminder. Stick it on your fridge with a magnet, as a reminder, or above your TV. And let's keep becoming a center of life in this town, and life for each other, for Jesus' sake.]