

**THE MOTIVE TO GIVE; PS 125, MARK 12:38-44; GENEROSITY SUNDAY;  
11/8/15; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

In today's story Jesus identifies two kinds of giving: giving from abundance and giving from poverty. Giving from poverty surpasses giving from abundance because giving from poverty requires trust in God as the source of all that we need to live.

In their defense, the scribes and their wealthy friends who gave from their abundance had good reason to give as they did to the temple mission fund.

Well-to-do parishioners gave to the church so that the church could serve the needy; in return these parishioners received prayers at the Eucharist for their deceased loved ones hoping to alleviate any suffering they might be subject to in the afterlife. Giving in the early church also became equated with the expiation or forgiveness of sins. As early as Matthew's church, sin was spoken of in financial terms; sin was a "debt" as he refers to it in his version of the Lord's Prayer.

These motives and reasons for giving evolved over time. They were woven into the fabric of giving – not offered by the church as spiritual products for sale.

The problem was *and is* that while faith can exist without money, religious institutions cannot. And as the early church gave up on the imminent return of Jesus and refocused its ministry on the needs of the world, it turned to its members to sustain its work.

Mark's story today is a self-critical look at early Christian motives for giving at a time when the church realized it depended upon the gifts of its members to fulfill its mission. Not surprisingly, Mark presents a Jesus who is critical of those who used financial gifts to draw attention to themselves and gain status in the church and wider community.

Lest we think better of ourselves, remember, it was not long ago *Westminster* sold the right to sit in its pews; the pews closest to the pulpit went to the highest bidder.

In Pittsburgh, East Liberty Presbyterian Church, a magnificent Gothic structure, built by the Mellon family and occupying an entire city block became known as "Mellon's fire escape." Insurance, if you will, for the afterlife.

According to biographies of the Mellon family, they, like many of the industrial giants then, had good reason to want forgiveness.

In contrast to the transactional and self-serving nature of giving Jesus shows us a more excellent way. He lifts up the example of a person who gives very little by the standards of the scribes – a mere penny, yet for whom her gift represented all that she had. Her daring act of giving came, Jesus implies, from her recognition that God faithfully, consistently provided for her with blessings and protection.

But the key to her generosity is a combination of trust and gratitude; trust that this same God would care for and protect her through whatever future she might face; and gratitude for the daily blessings she received.

Therefore, she literally banked her life on her God and gave everything she had.

It is not easy to find contemporary examples of that widow's complete dependence upon God. But it occurred to me, after a recent loss in our family, that most of us face the choice to live like that widow, or not, when life intervenes.

As you may recall, I had the tender task and privilege a month ago of leading the graveside service, in Cincinnati, for my niece's four-month old baby boy who died inexplicably in his crib – they call it Sudden Infant Death Syndrome – but the diagnosis offers no real reason for the death. They say you live your faith forward and understand it backward. I am still learning from that tragic experience.

As my niece and her husband and our extended family stood at the graveside I said it is when life is unanswerable that we are reminded, usually painfully, that we have less control than we thought. When our gifts, our intelligence, and our power are stripped away by unexpected tragedy or loss, so is our pretense that we can save ourselves (or our children for that matter). But in our very weakness or poverty, if you will, we are reminded of our utter dependence upon God. I said this because our family in Cincinnati are devout church members. And strange as it seems, at our most vulnerable, while the loss of little Asher continued to sear itself into our hearts, we found comfort remembering that the Creator of Life is bigger than any of us or any of the problems or pain or darkness we face in life.

That widow was reminded every day that she could not save herself; women in her society were lowest on the rung of social standing and power. She daily depended upon God for food and shelter to survive.

Most of us don't experience poverty until we lose something precious – our health, a friend, a job, a loved one; and until then we are likely to think that we are in control of our little worlds, but the truth is we aren't.

Before we complete our intention cards today, it may be helpful to remember what it was that brought us here in the first place; to recall in our heart of hearts what we long for that the promise of a loving God can provide. Maybe it would be good for us to place ourselves, as that poor widow did, in God's care once again and live like she did with the recognition that all that we have and all that we need comes from a gracious, merciful Creator. The natural and honest response to that kind of God is to give back with a grateful heart. Amen.