

Tithing: A Leap of Faith

2 Corinthians 9:6-9 The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹ As it is written, "He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever."

Mark 12:41-44 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³ Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴ For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

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When we read about historical periods back in time, we're accustomed to reading about great battles and the conquests of explorers and people who made names for themselves in shaping the world. But in the Bible it's often the little people who stand out – the ordinary people who aren't famous for anything, except for some act of mercy or love which was lifted up and preserved. Where else would you find the story of a son who leaves home, wastes his father's money, returns home broke, and is welcomed by his father with open arms? Or a foreigner, a member of a despised ethnic group, who stops at the side of the road to tend the wounds of a stranger who was beaten and left for dead? Or a widow who, during a famine, gave her last crust of bread to a hungry prophet named Elijah?

So today, we read about a woman whose name we don't know, but her story is told because one day she threw two copper coins into the temple treasury. As Jesus went about preaching the Gospel, he saw people who exemplified the things he was talking about. When he found such a person, he pointed to them as an image of the Good News. On this day, as Jesus rested by the temple gate, he heard the clink of two small coins being dropped into the offering box. The sound of the coins was distinctly different. They didn't make the loud, heavy sound of the larger coins being thrown into the box. This sound was hollow, almost muffled. He saw a frail woman in old clothing who was obviously not very well-to-do. Jesus had a keen ability to see into the depths of people's lives, and this woman was a clear example of someone whose attitude hadn't been skewed by the culture of the day.

Through most of history, widows have had a precarious existence. Without a husband, there wasn't enough labor to raise enough crops to live on, or enough income to buy necessities. There was no social security, no 401k, no IRA, no stocks or bonds – in short, no safety net. A widow was most likely dependent on grown children or what little help that kinfolk could offer. She might be able to barter her skill as a cook, or skill in sewing for a bit of food, if there was someone who could afford to have somebody do those things. The two small coins that the widow dropped into the treasury box might have bought tomorrow's bread. At best, they were the sum total of her savings, her safety net, her security for a day or two when no one needed her small skills.

"Come on over here," Jesus called to his disciples. "Come and see this woman. She's put in more than all the others. They've given out of their wealth, but she, poor as she is, put in everything, all of her resources." She put the substance of her life into that offering. It wasn't the leftovers; it wasn't what she wouldn't miss. It was her resources. It was her security for tomorrow. She took a leap of faith, not knowing at all what the next day might bring.

We know that God's ways are not our ways. This story is a clear example of that. We focus on how much we or someone else gives to the church. But, how much doesn't matter to God. But God does take note of how generous we are with what we have. The percentage is more important than the amount.

It's this leap of faith – the response which leads us to give and share far beyond what we'd ordinarily do - that I want us to think about this morning. Can you think of a time in your life when you broke out of the routine to do something unexpected? Isn't it true that when a need strikes us with real force, when someone is in trouble, or when help is called for, we often find energy and strength that wasn't there? We take the leap. We go beyond what we'd ordinarily do, because the situation calls for it. Has it ever happened to you that you've come home after an exhausting day, feeling physically and mentally drained, and the telephone rings? Someone on the other end is in distress. Could you come? You rush back out that door, whispering, "Lord, show me the way. I'm so tired." Not only does God show you the way, but you're revitalized.

Think back to some time in your past when times were hard. Perhaps there was a time in your childhood when money was scarce. Perhaps you lived on a tiny budget when you were in school. Perhaps there were times when you were out of a job and the bills were overwhelming. I notice though, that somehow you made it through those times, because you're here today. In those hard times, you realized that you could do more and come through more with less than you would've thought possible.

If we take a leap of faith like the widow with two coins, the way will be shown. The amazing thing about this woman is that she didn't hold back. She put her resources into that offering box. Her leap of faith wasn't just a momentary impulse. It was an act that would have implications for tomorrow and the next day and the days ahead. This is what Jesus praised. Not the surge of temporary piety which we all feel from time to time, but the complete self-giving of this woman. While the Pharisees debated in the streets with Jesus about what was God's and what was Caesar's, this woman had no doubt. It was all God's, her whole life, everything. That was her starting point. She didn't haggle over what was God's and what was hers. Her life was God's. She lived by faith, she lived by trusting God, and it affected everything she did.

There are several aspects of this story which affect our stewardship response this year. One has to do with our starting point. Do we believe that our own lives are a gift of God? Do we believe that every day we receive far more from God than we can ever give back in return? Don't give to the church just to support a budget. Give to say thanks to God for all he's given us. The starting point is that our lives belong to God. All we have and all we are is God's gift. It was very clear that the widow who put her two coins into the temple box believed this.

A second aspect is that what we believe is directly expressed in what we give. There are many Christians who have a faulty view of money. They don't think the church should ever talk about money, yet Jesus did. He called his disciples over to praise this woman, because her leap of faith was concretely expressed in giving her last penny to the temple. Jesus celebrated that act, and he lifted up this woman as an example for every generation to ponder.

What we do with our money says a great deal about us. The biblical standards of giving were very high. The Old Testament law was a tithe. Each year the Israelites were required to offer ten percent of all the crops and produce of their land back to God, and every three years the full ten percent was to be given to the poor. The tithe was a continual reminder to Israel that they were God's people --- that God had brought them out of Egypt, out of bondage into a land flowing with milk and honey. The tithe was required. Anything over that was an offering. The tithe was only the starting point, the obligation. If

we held ourselves to that standard, then we'd have to say that most of us have never made an offering to God. We haven't even done what was required of our ancestors.

The Bible challenges us to consider what we do with our money. How do we spend it? What values are expressed by our use of money? Jesus said, ". . . *where your treasure is, there will your heart be also*" (Matthew 6:21). Sit down with your bank statement and credit card statements. Take a fresh look at where the money is going. Think about your out of pocket spending. How much is real necessity, real needs? How much is wants rather than needs? How much is impulse purchases? What percentage of your income are you really giving back to God in gratitude for all the blessings God has given you? What percentage is going for fast food, entertainment, and odds and ends that, in reality, provide little continuing value in your life?

Every family is struggling these days with financial pressures, but we usually find the money to do the things we really want to do. Where our treasures are, that's where our hearts are. Does your giving reflect your faith, your trust, and your gratitude? Now, there are times when low-percentage giving is a necessity, but in most cases, it reflects unexamined stewardship.

We can see our glass as half empty or half full. It really depends on our perspective, our priorities, and our level of trust. Our view of life can focus on scarcity and we can live in anxiety and fear. But, over and over we're told to "Fear not!" We're urged to recognize the abundance God provides and live lives that express our gratitude and trust.

The most amazing thing about the woman in our text is her leap of faith. She gave far beyond her means. She did more than what was required. Again, it's a question of trust. She not only believed her life was God's, but she trusted that if she did what she felt called to do, God wouldn't let her down. God would show her the way.

Maybe giving has always been an obligation for you. Maybe this year, when you take a leap of faith, you'll experience the joy of giving, of responding gladly to all you have received. Everybody's situation is different. May God grant you the wisdom to see what she has given to you. May this widow be a challenge to you. Is there some leap of faith you might take? Is your response this year something that could cause Jesus to look up and notice as you pass by the temple treasury? Are you spiritually ready to prayerfully consider tithing? Most of us are capable of much more than we ever dreamed, and, when leaps of faith are taken, God shows us the way. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,
Our lives – all that we are, and all that we have – are a gift from God.
Examine your stewardship of these gifts.
Does your giving illustrate faith, trust and gratitude?