

“Reckless Generosity”

Mark 12:38-44

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Stone Mountain, Georgia
November 8, 2009

Who is the most generous person you know? Has this person always been generous? Have you talked to this individual about their generosity? Has anyone had a conversation with you about generosity?

Would you want to talk to the widow in our text about what she did in the temple the day Jesus visited? I certainly would. I don't know that I have talked to anyone who gave away their last penny, like this poor widow did. Our text says that she had two small coins worth a fraction of a penny and put both of them in the temple treasury. Perhaps I could understand giving one of them, but not both. This fascinates me.

It also compels me to ask some questions, beginning with the most obvious. **Why did she give all she had that day?**

Maybe she was wired to be generous. Some people are, you know. It's just a part of their DNA. “That person would give the shirt off their back,” I've heard it said about family members and friends. For some people, giving is no struggle. It comes naturally, as it may have for this widow.

She could have given all she had because this was what she was taught. There were thirteen containers in the temple, referred to as trumpets because of their shape, and worshipers were expected to put something in all of them. She did not have thirteen coins, but she had two and did what she could do. If this was her motive, you have to admire her for being obedient. She may have even felt guilty for not putting anything in the other eleven containers.

Perhaps there was a time when she and her husband gave out of their abundance, but no longer could she do this. She was going to give now out of her poverty and would continue to do so as long as she had anything to give. Her circumstances changed, but not her habits.

I don't know why she gave all she had. What I know is that it caught Jesus' attention. While others were looking at the attention-grabbing scribes, dressed in their long flowing robes waiting for the next compliment, Jesus looked at the widow whose foreclosure may have allowed the scribes to purchase these robes.

“Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, ‘I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth, but she, out of her poverty, put in everything she had to live on’ ” Mark 12:43-44.

Why did Jesus lavish her with praise? I think he was impressed with her behavior. It was such a contrast to the greedy religious leaders whom she was supporting. It lifted his spirit to find one who was truly “pure in heart.”

I think it also inspired him to give his all. If she could give everything she had that day, and do it humbly and quietly, then he could follow her example in the days ahead. I think her generosity helped him to be faithful all the way to the cross.

There is a gospel song by the title, “When He Was on the Cross, I Was on His Mind.” Perhaps that is true. I would rather believe, however, when he was on the cross, this poor widow was on his mind. Her simple act of generosity enabled him to give everything he had.

Whose act of generosity caught your attention and inspired you to be more generous?

Robert Fulghum is known for his bestseller, All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten. Alongside his mirror in his bathroom is a picture of a lady that is not his wife. Every morning when he shaves, he glances at her.

Who is she? She is a small, humped-over woman wearing sandals, a blue eastern robe and headdress, or sari. She is surrounded by important-looking people in tuxedos, evening gowns and the regalia of royalty. She is Mother Teresa receiving her Nobel Peace Prize.

Fulghum keeps that picture there to remind him every morning that he needs to be more like her if he wants to truly make a positive difference in the world.

Would anyone put your picture on their mirror? What changes do you need to make in order to inspire others to be more generous?

Let me tell you what I think is unique about our text. I think both of these stories are about us because there is a beautiful angel and an ugly demon inside each of us. At times we are the widow, humbly carrying out our responsibilities. We are genuine, sincere, compassionate, kind, grateful and generous to a fault. We support those institutions that are trying to make the world better and trust the leaders guiding them. We do our part to strengthen God's work even when it requires sacrifices, because we believe in Him and His vision for the world.

There is another side to us, though, and it is not pretty. As Gordon McDonald writes, "There is a person deep inside of us not unlike an assassin." Just like the scribes, we can be ruthless when it comes to protecting our interests and maintaining a lifestyle to which we have grown accustomed. We abuse power and hurt others without considering the hardships we inflict upon them. We think life is about us, manipulating and exploiting others to satisfy our desires. You would never know it, however, when we come to church. We cover it up well by going through the motions of worship and praise.

This text reminds me that we are not all bad but neither are we all good. We truly are a mixture of the good, bad and ugly. The ugliness of the scribe and the beauty of the widow reside in all of us.

Which one usually wins that struggle in your life? Which one do you want to prevail? Which do you think those around you prefer?

Which one does our culture call us to be? Which one does our value system reward? Which one is portrayed as having the most fun and promoting happiness? Which one gets elected to positions of leadership? Which one honors and pleases God?

I think the last question is easy to answer based upon Jesus' words in our text. God delights in the person that embodies integrity, humility, compassion, generosity, commitment, dedication and sincerity. These are the traits that bring the best out in us and build bridges to others. These are the virtues that build community and make the world a better place to live. These are the people that inspire greatness in others.

I think that you and I can be this kind of person. It will not be easy in our culture and will require help. You'll need people who inspire and encourage you, like this widow did Jesus. This church is one place you will find people like this. Come join us on our journey of faith.

You will also need God's help and He eagerly offers it. Why not talk to Him about it now.