

“Imaginative Giving”

Rev. David Gregory

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Pentecost 25



The Widow's Mite
James Christensen

Readings

Mark 12:41-44

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

Sitting across from the offering box, he was observing how the crowd tossed money in for the collection. Many of the rich were making large contributions. One poor widow came up and put in two small coins—a measly two cents. Jesus called his disciples over and said, “The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they’ll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn’t afford—she gave her all.”

From David Whyte

in *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment, and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*

To give is to make an imaginative journey and put oneself in the body, mind and anticipation of another. To give is to make our own identities more real in the world by committing to something specific in the other person, and something tangible that could represent that quality. To give is also to carry out the difficult task of putting something of our own essence in what we have given To give appropriately always involves a tiny act of courage, a step of coming to meet, of saying I see you, and I appreciate you and I am also making an implicit promise for the future.

As the autumn wanes we find ourselves reflecting once again on cycles of life. Each year, as the darkness begins to come earlier, the shift to standard time brings it earlier still, hurtling us toward the solstice, inviting us to a warm hearth and a place of restfulness and reflection. When the time changes, our bodies do too. Oh, it may take a few days for our circadian rhythms to adjust, but once they do, we’re reminded of our resilience, the ways we cope with different patterns, different energies, different dreams. All of this—as we enter the season of giving, receiving, and gratitude.

This time of year highlights how deeply we are connected to the earth beneath us and the bounty of its harvest, how dependent we are on the rain that falls from the skies, and grateful we are for things that are beyond our capacity to create, to control, or to even to change. We may sow seeds, cultivate and water, but there is an energy of life that creates the growth that produces what we need. It's a cycle of planting, tending, reaping, sharing, and giving thanks. But there's an energy behind it all, the energy we call life, the Spirit we call Divine; some dare to call it God. This One of Many Names is never more recognizable than in the bounty made tangible in the autumn harvest. Every gourd, every pumpkin, every roasted turkey is infused with the glory of this bounty, but it is a bounty that is only shared by some and not by all. Hence, the necessity of giving.

Jesus told the familiar story of the destitute widow who was in his time, or perhaps in any time, an expression of society's most vulnerable. He was seated across from the offering box as one by one wealthy people made large contributions. The gifts that they gave were generous. They were noble. They were needed. The people who gave them were no doubt blessed in their giving, reminding us of an important truth, that there is nothing morally reprehensible about being wealthy. Wealth and abundance, when it is lovingly shared, is a means of righting the injustices inflicted by those who are manipulative and greedy. There was nothing in Jesus's words to indict these wealthy people who were bringing their gifts. He simply acknowledged that they were giving something they would never miss. Their giving would not put them in a place of need. They had more besides. But there was this widow whose entire treasure consisted of a couple of coins, and he watched as she placed those coins in the box. Those coins would be sorely missed.

It reminds me of a Netflix series we have been watching, called *The Maid*, which recounts the harrowing experiences of a young single mom who has escaped an abusive environment, only to face another abusive environment—the navigation of what we might call the social safety net. But she finds no safety and no net. She is thwarted at every turn by regulations, by stigmas and judgments, and the harsh reality that no one is looking out for her. It is difficult to watch and difficult to stop watching. Dramatically it is stunningly beautiful, but the story it tells is the same as in Mark's gospel.

There are powerful and wealthy people of good will, and there are powerless people with no options, trapped with no way out of their circumstances. And in the Jesus story, both are givers. His point is well taken that in terms of proportion, the widow gave all that she had. My question is *what would make such a vulnerable person do such a thing?* This is where the scripture is silent, and where we are left to wonder and speculate; and this is where David Whyte helps us find deeper layers of understanding. We can preach sermons about the nobility of sacrificial giving, but unless we can place ourselves in the shoes of the most vulnerable, we will never actually know what sacrificial giving truly is.

David Whyte says that “to give is also to carry out the difficult task of putting something of our own essence in what we have given.” In other words, we haven't really given until we've given ourselves. If we have vast treasure, and give from what we do not miss, then ours is the harder task to put something of our own essence in what we have given. In this way, the widow had the

easier path. Her own survival, her own essence, was contained in the two coins she tossed into the box. Giving is an imaginative journey, we are told, one in which we place ourselves in the bodies, the minds, and the anticipations of others.

As our friend Nick Morris helped us understand last Sunday in his discussion of his work in the Street Chaplaincy, it is one thing to hand a five-dollar bill to someone who is unhoused. It is quite another to walk amongst the flooded tents under the bridge in San Rafael, and to show “a tiny act of courage, a step of coming to meet, of saying I see you, and I appreciate you and I am also making an implicit promise for the future.” Giving can be a purely spiritual practice, but only when its single agenda is love. Jesus had harsh words for those who gave in order to impress others, or to exercise control or power over people and situations. As is reflected in all of Jesus’s teaching, the only thing is love. Love your neighbor as yourself. Say to that neighbor, “I see you, I appreciate you, and I am making you an implicit promise” that there will be a future.

In terms of our community, this is a time and season where we consider the future of our church. November is pledge month, the results of which will show us the choices that we will need to make as we move forward. There is indeed sincere gratitude for the ways that we have weathered the storm of a global pandemic, but our future as a congregation is not a given. We can give to our church from our abundance or from our poverty, but what matters most is the motivation, or the heart, or the love that causes us to give.

We may wish to make real our identity as a community within the human race by committing to something specific, like CCC—something tangible that represents the quality of our togetherness and what that togetherness means in a world that has plenty of hatred, injustice, and strife. We have much work to do in the face of the inequities we see around us, the systems that beat people down and lock them into cycles of poverty and grief. But these systems are never broken by giving of our substance. They only break when we give of our essence as well. It’s an imaginative journey we are on, and if we can imagine it, it is possible.

