



Liturgical Day: The 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Date: October 12, 2008

Sermon Title: Sacrificial Giving<sup>i</sup>

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last week, we began a five-week discussion of financial generosity by focusing on the anxiety that rises in some of us when we talk about money at church. The interesting thing is this: anxiety about giving is, at worst, a temporary condition. Any of us can become anxious when we think about our giving. But it is also true that any of us, by accepting the challenge to make our financial support of ministry a priority in our lives, can grow out of that anxiety. The more we give, the more we learn to trust God, and the less anxious we tend to be about giving. So are you anxious about your support of the church? Do you become uncomfortable when we talk about money during worship? (Do you get nervous any time Jerry Mayer or Rhonda Sinnema or Alan Okerman pick up a microphone?) The best way to rid yourself of that anxiety is to increase your financial support of Christian ministry. Ask any who have already done it, and they'll tell you what a relief and a blessing it is.

This week's theme is actually a bit more difficult. This week we are talking about sacrificial giving. To have a better idea of what that's all about, first think about what the word sacrifice means. I saw an interesting definition this past week. It read: "Sacrifice may be defined as selflessness, or the readiness to inflict pain upon yourself to save others." It reminded me of a story I once heard.

*A volunteer at Stanford Hospital remembers a little girl named Liz who was suffering from a rare and serious disease. Her only chance of recovery appeared to be a blood transfusion from her five-year-old brother, who had miraculously survived the same disease and had developed the antibodies needed to combat the illness.*

*The doctor explained the situation to her little brother, and asked the boy if he would be willing to give his blood to his sister. He hesitated for only a moment before taking a deep breath and saying, "Yes, I'll do it if it will save Liz."*

*As the transfusion progressed, he lay in bed next to his sister and smiled, as did everybody in the room, seeing the color returning to her cheeks. Then his face grew pale and his smile faded. He looked up at the doctor and asked with a trembling voice, "Will I start to die right away?" Being young, the boy had misunderstood the doctor; he thought he was going to have to give his sister all of his blood. Yet he willingly submitted to the procedure anyway.<sup>ii</sup>*

This five-year-old boy may not have understood exactly what the medical professionals were proposing for him and his sister, but he understood what the concept of sacrifice is all about. To sacrifice means to give up something that is important, for the sake of something that is even more important.

We see examples of sacrificial giving all the time, although most of them don't include giving life itself, as was the case with the five-year-old boy. A batter hits a long fly ball that will certainly be caught in the outfield, so the runner on third base can score. Parents refrain from going out for nice dinners or taking expensive vacations in order to help a child afford a college education. A relief worker risks danger and disease to respond to a crisis in a foreign country. A mother hen stands between her chicks and a

FIRST LESSON

ISAIAH 25:1-9

PSALM

PSALM 23

SECOND LESSON

PHILIPPIANS 4:1-9

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. MATTHEW 22:1-14

STEWARDSHIP TEXT

ST. MARK 12:38-44

PRAYER OF THE DAY

**LORD OF THE FEAST, YOU HAVE PREPARED A TABLE BEFORE ALL PEOPLES AND POUED OUT YOUR LIFE WITH ABUNDANCE. CALL US AGAIN TO YOUR BANQUET. STRENGTHEN US BY WHAT IS HONORABLE, JUST, AND PURE, AND TRANSFORM US INTO A PEOPLE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS AND PEACE, THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, OUR SAVIOR AND LORD. AMEN.**

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visiting fox. A Secret Service Agent steps in front of a President, to take the brunt of an assassin's bullet. Sacrificial giving: giving up something that is important, for the sake of something more important.

When we talk about sacrificial giving to Christian ministry, we mean the kind of giving where we give up something that is important to us, for the sake of something that is even more important. That's a pretty radical understanding of giving, isn't it? It is one thing to be generous in our giving. It is another thing to be committed to grow every year in our giving. But talking about sacrificial giving takes generosity to an even higher plane. It means committing to such a significant level of giving, that we literally give up on other interests that we can no longer afford. We choose to ignore interests that others of our income level can enjoy; interests that may even be important to us, but which aren't as important to us as Christian ministry. So we give them up willingly, for the opportunity to be more extravagant in our support of what God is up to in our world.

That is what sacrificial giving is all about. And that is what Jesus sees, when he observes the poor widow in today's Gospel lesson. During the last week of his life, Jesus sits in the temple with his followers, watching the faithful as they drop their contributions into the treasury. Some of these contributors are wealthy, and they contribute large amounts of money. Impressive amounts of money. In the next passage of St. Mark's Gospel, one of his disciples will comment on the large stones and the large buildings of the temple complex. It takes a remarkable amount of money to build and maintain something like that. The disciples are impressed, but Jesus isn't. Neither is he impressed by the wealthy contributors who are there that day. He understands that they have great wealth, and even though their contributions are large, they give only a small fraction of what is available to them.

Then this poor widow shows up. She unceremoniously walks over to the treasury, and deposits two of the smallest coins that are placed in the box that day. But Jesus is impressed. He realizes that she has given all she has. She gives a greater gift than anyone else who contributes that day, because while they are dropping in a share of their abundance, she, in her poverty, gives to God everything that she has to give. This, truly, is sacrificial giving.

I'd love to know what is going on in her mind. I have so many questions. Why is she willing to give everything she has? What experience has she had with God that leads her to such a generous gift? Such a sacrificial gift? What are her plans for the future? Does she have some money coming? Or are those truly her very last coins? Does she have the ability to earn more money? Or are there relatives who might help her out from time to time? Or is she completely vulnerable, with nobody to stand with her in her time of difficulty? I have so many questions, but none of them are answered by St. Mark, or by Jesus. We are simply left with the image of this poor widow who gives everything to God; the image of one of the very few people Jesus commends without reservation in the New Testament. Sacrificial giving indeed.

I've got a few questions I'd love to have answered about this woman. But, of course, the only real important question is this: What does this story, and the reaction Jesus has to her, say about our giving to ministry today? If Jesus asked everyone he met to give away all they had, we might be able to read this Gospel and conclude that he wants us to liquidate all our assets and distribute them to the poor as well. But that isn't the case. A careful reading of the New Testament reveals that Jesus doesn't call everyone to a life of poverty. But a faithful reading of this morning's text says, at the very least, that Jesus is pleased when believers give at sacrificial levels. And remembering that he loves us enough to give his life so that we might be right with God, it behooves us to give at least enough back to him, that it causes us to make some adjustments – some sacrifices – in our ability to support our other interests.

The bottom line is this: If our giving to Christian ministry doesn't limit our choices to some degree, then it isn't the kind of giving that Jesus commends in today's Gospel lesson. Today I encourage you to consider this poor widow, whose love for God runs so deep that she gives everything she has. How it that your giving, and mine, can emulate her sacrificial generosity? That's the question today's Gospel lesson proposes – a question that we answer every day of our lives. May God grant us the faith and the courage and the gratitude to answer it in a way that allows us to be sacrificial in our giving to Christian ministry too. Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (October 12, 2008)

*This Sunday at Saint Peter, we continue our Fall Stewardship Campaign. The theme is ASPEN, and the focus for this five-week emphasis will be:*

|                   |       |                        |
|-------------------|-------|------------------------|
| <b>Anxiety</b>    | 10/5  | St. Matthew 6:25-34    |
| <b>Sacrifice</b>  | 10/12 | St. Mark 12:41-44      |
| <b>Peace</b>      | 10/19 | St. John 14:25-27      |
| <b>Enthusiasm</b> | 10/26 | St. Matthew 13:44-50   |
| <b>Now</b>        | 11/2  | 2nd Corinthians 8:1-16 |

English Text: <sup>iii</sup>

<sup>12.38</sup> As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, <sup>39</sup> and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! <sup>40</sup> They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

<sup>41</sup> He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. <sup>42</sup> A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. <sup>43</sup> 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. <sup>44</sup> 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." <sup>iv</sup>

Greek Text:

<sup>12.38</sup> Καὶ ἐν τῇ διδαχῇ αὐτοῦ ἔλεγεν· βλέπετε ἀπὸ τῶν γραμματέων τῶν θελόντων ἐν στολαῖς περιπατεῖν καὶ ἀσπασμοὺς ἐν ταῖς ἀγοραῖς <sup>39</sup>καὶ πρωτοκαθεδρίας ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς καὶ πρωτοκλισίας ἐν τοῖς δείπνοις, <sup>40</sup>οἱ κατεσθίοντες τὰς οἰκίας τῶν χηρῶν καὶ προφάσει μακρὰ προσευχόμενοι· οὗτοι λήμψονται περισσότερον κρίμα.

<sup>41</sup> Καὶ καθίσας κατέναντι τοῦ γαζοφυλακίου ἐθεώρει πῶς ὁ ὄχλος βάλλει χαλκὸν εἰς τὸ γαζοφυλάκιον. καὶ πολλοὶ πλούσιοι ἐβάλλον πολλά· <sup>42</sup>καὶ ἐλθοῦσα μία χήρα πτωχὴ ἐβάλεν λεπτὰ δύο, ὃ ἐστὶν κοδράντης. <sup>43</sup>καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ἡ χήρα αὕτη ἢ πτωχὴ πλείον πάντων ἐβάλεν τῶν βαλλόντων εἰς τὸ γαζοφυλάκιον· <sup>44</sup>πάντες γὰρ ἐκ τοῦ περισσεύοντος αὐτοῖς ἐβάλον, αὕτη δὲ ἐκ τῆς ὑστερήσεως αὐτῆς πάντα ὅσα εἶχεν ἐβάλεν ὅλον τὸν βίοναυτῆς. <sup>v</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Additional illustrations related to sacrifice:

Fifty-six men signed the Declaration of Independence. Their conviction resulted in untold sufferings for themselves and their families. Of the 56 men, five were captured by the British and tortured before they died. Twelve had their homes ransacked and burned. Two lost their sons in the Revolutionary Army. Another had two sons captured. Nine of the fifty-six fought and died from wounds or hardships of the war. Carter Braxton of Virginia, a wealthy planter and trader, saw his ships sunk by the British navy. He sold his home and properties to pay his debts and died in poverty. At the battle of Yorktown, the British General Cornwallis had taken over Thomas Nelson's home for his headquarters. Nelson quietly ordered General George Washington to open fire on the Nelson home. The home was destroyed and Nelson died bankrupt. John Hart was driven from his wife's bedside as she was dying. Their thirteen children fled for their lives. His fields and mill were destroyed. For over a year, he lived in forest and caves, returning home only to find his wife dead and his children vanished. A few weeks later, he died from exhaustion.

Kenneth L. Dodge, Resource, Sept./ Oct., 1992, p. 5.

There's a story about a certain society in South Africa who once wrote to famous explorer David Livingstone and asked, "Have you found a good road to where you are? If so, we want to send other men to join you." Livingstone replied, "If you have men who will come ONLY when there is a good road, I don't want them."

Source: Woodie Burt, president of Hannibal-LaGrange College

"Sacrifices are relative to where we are in our walk with the Lord. A sacrifice is the willing surrender of something you have your heart set on. For those in impoverished areas, it may be foregoing a need to help others. In America, it may be driving that old car a couple more years in order to send another missionary abroad. God looks at the heart, not at the checkbook."

Larry Burkett, founder of Christian Financial Concepts

<sup>ii</sup> Source: Bradford, Steven [BradfordS@TCICOMM.COM], 2/2/1999

<sup>iii</sup> A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at [http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church\\_year/lectionary.html](http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html).

<sup>iv</sup> St. Mark 12:38-44, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

<sup>v</sup> St. Mark 12:38-44, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).