

BGCW10/23/11 Worship Theme: Defined by Generosity, Proverbs 11: 24-25, 2 Corinthians 9: 5-15, Mark 12: 41-44

You may have heard the story about the farmer who wanted a hearty breakfast of bacon and eggs. He went out to the barnyard and asked the chickens and the pig for a contribution. The chickens readily agreed; they would give the farmer two fresh eggs. The pig, on the other hand, balked at the farmer's request. The chickens chided the pig. "Farmer Brown feeds you everyday, he cleans your sty, and takes care of you. The least you can do is give him some bacon," they urged. "We are giving him the eggs." "That is easy for you to say," the pig replied. "For you, the eggs are a gift. For me, the bacon is a total commitment."

From now on, every time I eat bacon and eggs, I will remember how that pig's life has been defined by its generosity and total commitment to my nutrition. Now I am pretty sure that the pig did not give its life as a cheerful giver as Paul calls us to be, but gave it all, it did.

What about us? Are our lives "Defined by Generosity?" In my 41 plus years in ministry I have officiated at 570 funerals. The funeral sermons that are easiest to write are the ones about people whose lives have been defined by their faith in God in Jesus Christ and by their generosity—generosity of faith, love, time, talents and money—shared with their families, friends, churches, the needy and complete strangers. I am blessed to look out among you today, the living and see fellow Christians whose lives are "Defined by Generosity"—generosity of faith, love, time, talents and money shared in ways I have seen and in ways I cannot even imagine. You inspire me to be more generous.

And on a personal note, the people who taught me the most about being "Defined by Generosity" were my parents and my in-laws. I could go on for hours on how they were so generous in gifts of faith, love, time, talents and money with us. I think parents or grandparents set the best examples for future generations and how we are "Defined by Generosity".

Today's scripture lessons are also an inspiration to lead us to be further "Defined by Generosity." Let's begin with the classic lesson from Mark 12. Over the centuries, the impoverished woman Jesus noticed as she dropped two small coins into the temple

treasury box has certainly been “Defined by Generosity.” Writer Stan Purdum shares these insights on this story. “This widow was having a hard way to go. Without a husband, she was dependent on the capricious whims of charity. There is a painting of this impoverished woman by artist A. D. Rahm that pictures her dropping in her coins with one hand while holding a child's hand with her other. Does that surprise you? It may; many of us naturally picture this woman as elderly. The Bible does not say that, however. She may have been a young woman with not only herself to feed, but small children as well. And if that is so, it then casts a different light on her story. Imagine what reasonable arguments might have run through her head as she debated what to do about the temple offering: *Remember you have children to think of. Charity begins at home. Besides, what difference can the pittance you have to give make alongside the larger gifts? Let those who can afford it give. You have obligations right in your own household. Nobody expects you to give anyway.*”

But the fact is, she chose to give all she had. Jesus, who saw her make her tiny offering, instantly understood the powerful significance of what she had done, and pointed her action out to his disciples as an example of real sacrifice. And notice that he said that she had contributed “all she had to live on.” We might wonder how Jesus knew that, for she in no way announced it, but somehow he did.”

“Jesus praised what she had done, but it is important to notice that Jesus did not in any way condemn the other givers for the size of their gifts; he simply made the point that the meaning of a gift is best measured by what is left after the gift is made.”

In terms of buying power, the widow's offering was insignificant, but the devotion that motivated her gift was phenomenal. That kind of devotion has done more to help meet the needs of people throughout the centuries than cash alone could ever do.

Let us not kid ourselves, though. Without money, a lot of truly helpful things that have been done for people could never have been accomplished. Money has a very real power about it that is able to command goods and services to be where people who need them exist.” The ministry of this congregation in the name of Jesus Christ since 1869 could not have happened, and cannot continue without our money and people like the widow at the temple—people “Defined by Generosity.”

“The gift the widow gave to the temple treasury was not just two small copper coins. It was a gift of devotion and faith. By giving to the temple the only money she had -- the cost of her family's next meal -- she was expressing a devotion to God that is quite rare.” Stan Purdum - [Sermons on the Gospel Readings, Series II, Cycle B.](#)

Lutheran pastor, Steven Molin shares a modern version of a similar story. I suspect that it is autobiographical. “He was a Lutheran pastor from central Iowa, but with an avocation for carpentry, and that's why he was spending a month's vacation on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. His goal that month was to build a new bathroom for the community there. On the last day of his vacation, a small Indian girl approached him and, in her outstretched hand she held a nickel. ‘Here,’ she said, ‘I want you to have this.’ ‘No’ the pastor said, embarrassed. ‘I can't take your nickel. You keep it.’ ‘Please take it,’ the girl insisted. ‘Besides, I have another one!’ And she opened her other hand to expose a shiny, new nickel. Out of respect to that generous little girl -- a girl who ‘cheerfully’ wanted to give away half of what she had -- the pastor took her nickel and placed it in his pocket. But the story doesn't end there.”

“When he returned to his home congregation and delivered his first sermon, he held that nickel up high before them and told them how it came to be his. Then he told them of his plan to return to the Pine Ridge Reservation the next summer to build a dining hall for that same community center. The pastor then did something that seems so bold, most pastors would never consider it, for fear it may cost them their jobs. That pastor asked all the people in worship that Sunday to reach into their pockets and their purses, and to count their cash. ‘I invite you,’ he said, ‘to follow the example of that little girl; I invite you to give half of the cash that you have with you this morning toward the building of that community center dining hall.’”

“Grown men began to weep! Women began to squirm in their seats. The people's discomfort began to escalate, probably in direct proportion to the amount of cash they knew they were carrying in their pockets and purses. But then the offering was through, and when news of this little girl's gesture spread through that small community ... by Friday afternoon, more than \$22,000 had been given to the cause.”

“Have you ever wondered why some people give? Have you ever analyzed why you give? Sometimes it is because we have extra, and it seems like the right thing to do. Sometimes it is because we have been moved -- because something has touched an emotion deep within us -- and even if we can't really afford it, we give anyway. Sometimes we give, simply because giving is the most articulate way we know of saying, ‘Thank you.’ to God. It's a form of gratitude, really; giving is a natural response to having received something. The truth is, we can never celebrate what we give until we first celebrate what we have. That is a biblical principle: we can never celebrate what we give until we celebrate what we have. That little girl on the Pine Ridge gave that pastor a nickel –joyfully gave him a nickel— because she recognized that she had **two.**” [Sermons on the Gospel Readings Series III, Cycle B](#), Steven Molin

The story of the woman at the temple and the little girl on Pine Ridge are “powerful statements of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Jesus was not praising poverty nor was he saying that everyone should contribute everything they have. He was praising the attitude that comes in trust to God and says, ‘I recognize my emptiness but give what I can anyway. Then I come to you, Lord, in trust to be filled.’”

“The incident of the woman at the temple “took place during the final week of Jesus' life. He visited the temple and saw the widow make her gift on Tuesday or Wednesday; on Friday he died on the cross. It is clear that Jesus knew before he even started for Jerusalem what was going to happen when he got there. All that surely weighed heavily on him. We can imagine him sitting wearily near the temple treasury, perhaps wondering about the goodness in the human heart.”

“What he saw happening may have cheered him a little. He saw a lot of people putting money in the treasury. Some gave large amounts, some smaller, but most were probably trying to be faithful and were giving gifts as acts of worship. Then he saw the widow drop in her two coins. Perhaps the sight of her devotion was one thing that encouraged Jesus during his final hours before the cross.” How do we respond to his gift of total commitment on our behalf? Does our commitment give our Risen Lord encouragement as he walks with us in the Spirit today?

In speaking of commitment, “There is an old story from the days when church budgets were publicly subscribed in Sunday morning worship. In a certain church, the pastor started by asking who would make a \$1,000 pledge. Those willing and able to do so stood, and a secretary took down their names. The congregation applauded. Next, the pastor asked who would pledge \$900. Some stood and were applauded. And so it continued until the figure was lowered to the smallest amount. By then almost everyone present had pledged something. As the preacher was about to close, an old woman, known to have almost nothing to her name, came down the aisle, placed a few dollars in the pastor's hand and then returned to her seat. There was no applause, but when the pastor looked at the money, he knew she had given all she had. Finally he said to the assembled, ‘I think I hear applause from the nail-scarred hands.’”

“The devotion of that woman, like the devotion of the poor woman in the temple, and the little girl on Pine Ridge is a worthy gift, and we should each, according to what God has given us, emulate their spirit and attitude. For some of us, it will mean giving substantial financial gifts. For others, not as much. But for all, it should involve, in some meaningful and possibly costly way, a giving of our ourselves.” Stan Purdum - [Sermons on the Gospel Readings, Series II, Cycle B.](#)

As we heard in the Epistle Lesson from I Corinthians 9, such “Giving and being responsive to others are best when they flow willingly and not grudgingly. If we start with the obligation, we will never understand the freedom” and the joy of giving. “If we begin, instead, with the celebration of what and how much God has done for us and given to us” in Jesus Christ, “then the zeal for giving and for responding to others flows freely from it.” As Paul wrote: “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 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....Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” [TNIBC](#), Vol. X, pg.129

So, shall we be the gift of the eggs or the total commitment of the bacon? Will God and others say our lives are “Defined by Generosity?” I pray it be so.