

## *What Shall You Bring?*

First Congregational Church Branford

All Saints Sunday

Mark 12:41-44; November 4, 2018

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In today's scripture from Mark... everyone who entered the temple had to pay tithes and taxes, and it was customary to make a voluntary gift to the temple treasury.

Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 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. 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.'

The word of God for the people of God.

Let us pray... Let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable and pleasing in *your* sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

We've remembered our beloved today. It's okay to cry, to feel sad that they're no longer here. It's even okay to smile, maybe even laugh about some things they did. *Oh, you know that Bill, those crazy things he did!* It's a way to remember them, and the place they held in our life, and to be grateful for all the love they left behind. The love lives on in you. They go on, they keep on living and loving through the love you give. As we remember the saints who've departed, we also look around at all of these saints there are to love *right here!* You saints of FCC - who live together, die together, rise together, take care of one another, take one another in. Here in our *Life Among the Believers*, we cook meals for each other, wipe tears together, sit together, serve together, laugh together, worship together. In this thanksgiving season, we give thanks for all the love we give away. We give thanks for all the love Jesus gave away, for teaching us how to love. We remember *him* today in communion. *We remember, we remember, we remember.*

And... we remember him when we contemplate what we shall bring to the temple treasury!

Because, beloved, the time has come! The Stewardship Committee asked that I preach the stewardship sermon today! Don't run away! Come on! Jesus liked to talk about money. In fact, half of his parables were about possessions and how we use them. If preachers today preached the same percentage of sermons about money as Jesus told parables on money and stewardship, we'd hear 17 sermons on money each year! How'd that be?! Maybe I should up my game! (The Stewardship Committee's nodding *yes, yes, please!*)

I couldn't do it. I know it's hard to hear money talked about. Stewardship sermons can make you feel guilty. We like to be able to pay our bills, buy clothes, cars, piano lessons, football uniforms, prom dresses, go out to eat, go on vacation. We want to live a comfortable life. God wants you to, too. God's just saying, "put me before all of that – give me the first cut. Show me you love me first. You can still live the life you want – it may mean going out to eat a little less, not buying that pair of shoes; and, do you really need that ultra high definition television."

From a biblical standpoint, here's what giving is... I'm sorry to say... that it needs to hurt a little. The word is actually, sacrifice... In the Old Testament we learn that the Israelites sacrificed animals at God's altar. It's not that they didn't esteem animals--quite the contrary. They gave something to God that would truly get them where it hurts--their bellies - giving God that goat - maybe they went without dinner that particular night. They understood, and they actually **celebrated** that their offering had to be a sacrifice; that it had to **mean** something. This is how much they loved the one true God! When we make our offering to God at the altar every Sunday, is it hurting a little, or do we barely miss it? If we barely miss what we're giving... it's not a sacrifice. The bible teaches that ten percent of one's income is what felt about right to God.

In our family it's important for us to give to God from our first paychecks of the month. I write a check to Essex and I write a check to Branford. And, I always take a deep breath. Speaking of the belly, I get a little queasy sometimes! I get scared wondering if I'll have another interim position to go to - one time there wasn't a job available for 3 years! - *really, God, I need to write it for this much, but, but, but!*, or I'll wonder about my husband's current job - churches can be fickle with their clergy. I think about supporting our child, and seeing how much we'll be able to help put him through college *beginning this August. See, God, we're going to have to put money in the college treasury!* But, I just take another breath and remember that writing the checks demonstrates our love of God *over my fear of not having enough*. God is bigger than my fear. I love God more than I love my fear. The fact is, through lean times and fat times, God has always taken care of Ken, Abe, and me. We've had enough. I think because we just keep giving God the first cut.

I've come to believe the spiritual principle that when you give more than

you think you can, God provides. He takes care of you. I've had members share through the years that when they pledged very little they had a hard time making ends meet - and, I know this doesn't make sense, but when they took a risk and increased their pledge, and started giving to God first, instead of what was left, God blessed their stepping out in faith, and they suddenly started having enough. It's like, you get an unexpected check in the mail, or something doesn't cost as much, or some debt is voided. Uncanny things happen when you live in the flow of giving - it comes back to you. It's a spiritual principle. God blesses the practice of giving. *I don't know!*, the best thing I can say is to stay close to God and listen to the figure God gives you to put on your commitment card. Just do this - don't just automatically write the figure you wrote down last year. Get quiet, and listen to the figure that God gives you. He'll give you a number. He might encourage you to take a greater risk this year.

I'm going to tell a secret I didn't tell for 20 years, then I chose a couple of churches to tell it to these past 10 years. It was a story that was between God and me, and I treasured it. I also wanted to do as Jesus instructed - to not always let everybody know when you've done a good deed!

But, sometimes, giving stories need to be shared, so I'm sharing it again with you.

As you know, I lived a bit of a hedonist life in my twenties! *And*, being attractive, and sexy, were the *most* important things in my life. I breathed on all the attention I received. Ahhh... One day, shopping at Penney's, I positively fell in love with the most beautiful faux white rabbit jacket - oh, my gosh, it was so gorgeous. What mattered was that it looked and felt like the real deal. ***I really loved it.*** I got compliments everywhere I went on this jacket. *Oh, Suzanne, that is some jacket. You look so good in it, so sexy!* Mission accomplished.

... I'd only had the jacket for two years when, as fate would have it, at 29, I'd begun to let God find me again, and my values began to change. I was beginning to have the inkling that who I was becoming no longer fit the jacket. Christmas Eve morning 1988, I decided, *or God decided*, that I would give this jacket away. Now, I'd never done anything like that in my whole life. I'm not sure I'd *ever* experienced a generous impulse. I didn't come from a generous family. So, it was an odd, peculiar, scary feeling - and I was completely awed by it, awed over my ability to do such a thing. What was going on?

I drove to a poor section of town that cold morning in Charlotte, North Carolina - onto some neighborhood street, and saw some children playing. I parked a little ways down. I hadn't thought through what I was going to do. Was I supposed to go to someone's door? I didn't know. So, I just got out of my car - my beautiful, beloved jacket in hand, and I walked up to the oldest girl, who was 10-14, and said, "*can I give you this jacket for Christmas?*" Her face showed that

she wasn't happy. It flashed on me that she might be skeptical of it - did it come with strings attached?, or what would her mother say about receiving a gift from a white stranger? - and for a moment I worried that I'd done the wrong thing. The girl then smiled, politely said yes, and excitedly ran off with it, to what I assumed was her house. I got back in my car, drove away a little, stopped, and cried. I just cried. Because I didn't completely understand what was happening to me. But, I did understand that I had done something good in my life, with my life. Ya know?

Some years ago I made the connection that that was my version of Jesus' poor widow story. I had put in what I had, everything that had any meaning to me. To date, that has been my most generous offering.

Dorothy Day, cofounder of the Catholic Worker Movement, devoted herself to the daily practice of feeding the hungry, visiting prisoners, clothing the naked, caring for the sick. One day, a wealthy woman stopped into the Catholic Worker office to see what was going on, *what's going on in this place*, and was so moved by the community's witness that she... took off a large diamond ring and gave it to Day. Later that afternoon Day was talking with a poor single mother who lived nearby in a tenement house. Day remembered the beautiful ring in her pocket, pulled it out and slipped it onto the woman's finger. It was a shockingly extravagant act – the ring could've been sold and the money invested for the agency! Foolish woman! But, welcoming the poor woman as *Christ*, Day wanted to bless her with the very best she had.

On this All Saints Sunday, the saints who sat in these pews wanted *to bless you with the very best they had*. We're given an opportunity to pay it forward for the saints who will follow us - to give them the very best we have.

I hope you'll contemplate today's message, sit with it, sit with God over the next week, and come prepared next week to celebrate - with *your* sacrifice.

*What shall you bring, what shall you bring, what present, what token, when grateful you come, what can you offer in honor and praise? Give thanks for the past, for those who had vision, who planted and watered so dreams could come true. Give thanks for the now, for study, for worship, for mission that bids us turn prayer into deed. Give thanks for tomorrow, for knowing whatever tomorrow may bring, God gives us his word that always, forever, we rest in his keeping and live in his love.*

God bless you. Amen.

