

November 11, 2018 • 25th Sunday in Kingdomtide

## **“The Practices We Keep” – GRATEFUL Sermon Series**

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



Mark 12:38-44

*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, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”*

*He 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 story of the Widow’s Mite from Mark’s gospel is perhaps one of the more familiar Bible stories, known to many of us from Sunday School lessons and countless sermons. And the expression, “the widow’s mite”, is one of the many verses of the Bible that has found its way into common usage, so that even people who do not know the story as Mark recounts it and all that it means in the teaching of Jesus, know that “a widow’s mite”, as The American Heritage Dictionary defines it, is “a small contribution made by one who has little.”

Actually, however, the dictionary didn’t get it right. We who know the whole story know that “a widow’s mite” should be defined as “a huge contribution made by one who has little.” If you give your whole heart to God, there’s no bigger contribution you can possibly make.

That’s what Mark’s story of Jesus and the widow at the temple is really all about.

Jesus is in temple, observing all that’s going on. Those with considerable means are there, putting large sums into the offering vessels, giving out of their abundance. No judgment or comment is made. They have a lot and they give a lot, as Jesus would expect.

But Jesus also observes a poor widow who comes forward with but two small copper coins. That was all she had. She might easily have kept one for herself and offered only one, but she put everything into the offering. She had very little, and gave it all. Jesus called his disciples over and said: “Look”—just like when he’d held that small child—“this is what it’s all about. Truly I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those others—for they contributed out of their abundance, but she, out of her poverty, gave everything she had, her whole living.”

The widow models for us the self-giving love of Jesus Christ, who freely gave his whole living for us, his life, gave it all away, that we might know the fullness of God’s love and grace.

You see, the measuring stick of the Christian gospel, is not dollars and cents, bottom lines and profit margins. Those of abundant means who give generously might still have a lot left over and their hearts might remain untouched. The example Jesus lifts for us is one whose heart is totally given over to God. Her gift is “inconsequential” in size by worldly measure, but totally life transforming in what it says about her faith.

She had only two copper coins to give, yet her generosity and faithfulness knew no bounds. We are to measure our gifts not by dollars and cents, but by the size of the piece of our heart that goes with it.

This path we’re on together called “Christian discipleship” is a journey of continual growing in trust and generosity. And one important part of our spiritual practice that helps us to grow has to do with practicing gratitude. A contemporary Benedictine monk, David Steindl-Rast, has written: “ninety-nine percent of the time we have an opportunity to be grateful for something. [But] we just don’t notice it. We go through our days in a daze.” It’s as if we’re sort of living on auto-pilot.

Various practices of gratitude can help shape our souls and become habits that awaken us from the daze of our days. Taking time each day to pause, breathe deeply, awaken to the beauty all around, the many gifts of God, large and small, sprinkled throughout. Studies have shown that practicing gratitude re-aligns our reticular activating system, that is, a small part of our brain that regulates alertness, wakefulness, and helps us focus on good rather than bad. One therapist advises us, upon waking in the morning, to focus not on the day’s To-Do list, but rather to think of three things to be grateful for even before getting out of bed.

And if you’re not a morning person and can’t think of anything particularly eloquent before noon, it really is OK just to say “Thank you.” “Thank you, God.” I have a feeling that if all of us just said those words much more often than we do, our lives would be richer and fuller and our hearts would soften with gratitude and love.

The old Christian master, Meister Eckhart, put it so simply: “If the only prayer you ever say is “Thank you,” that would be enough.” But still, the point here is: we have to practice saying it, often, regularly, like when we’re learning to play an instrument or speak a new language, thousands of hours of practice, until it becomes a deeply ingrained habit, a routine pathway of grace.

That's why the magnet that we sent out with this year's invitation to giving shows the circling "grateful" logo of this year's Stewardship Campaign but adds the question: "What are you grateful for?" The idea is that you'll put this on your refrigerator or somewhere you'll see it often and that little question will nudge you, each time you see it, to pause and reflect and ask yourself: "what am I grateful for—in this moment, on this day, in this season of my life?"

Practicing gratitude recalibrates our hearts, until we grow in the example of the widow who gave her all, the example of Christ himself. Recalibrating our hearts, until we measure our gifts not by dollars and cents, but by the size of the piece of our heart that goes with it.

I'm quite certain that that widow didn't just show up one Sabbath and happen to give generously. My hunch is that she was there, week in and week out, praying and giving, over the years and decades of her life becoming the person Jesus observed that day.

How do we become that kind of person—generous, loving, kind, self-giving? I've been thinking about that a lot this week, and what a week it's been! And as we begin to move past the facts about the shootings in Thousand Oaks and the fires raging across our state, stories have begun to emerge. Amazing stories of kind, generous, thoughtful people. The bouncer Justin Meek at the Borderline Bar and Grill who, having been shot himself, threw barstools through the windows to make a way for others to escape with their lives. He himself didn't make it out. Ventura County Sheriff's Sgt. Ron Helus, months away from retirement, who responded to the call and went in first, doing his job, protecting others, dying in a storm of bullets. The young man who pulled a young student out from under the table where she was hiding and carried her to safety. She had no idea who he was.

And then there are the neighbors taking care of one another as the fires rage. The two graduates of Oak Park High who immediately raised \$200 on Facebook, drove to COSTCO, filled up their cars with emergency supplies---water, toiletries, diapers, food—and drove to the nearest evacuation center to give it all away.

And the parents who learned mid-day on Thursday that their youngest child had died in the Borderline Bar. They drove to their home in Simi Valley where they later told reporters about her, how wonderful she was and how she so loved her friends. Her father said: "We could either retreat and draw our curtains or we could talk about the beauty of the things that were...We didn't want her life to end. But we don't want her memories now to end, either."

Behind all these stories of extraordinarily brave ordinary heroes are lives of selfless compassion and generosity that grew over lifetimes, however short or long, lifetimes of caring and giving and loving beyond all measure. Hearts calibrated day in and day out by every simple word and gesture of kindness, valuing others more than self, measuring one's own life by the well-being of the whole community.

A young woman attending our church told me once why she comes to church. None of her friends come. They think she's a bit odd to do so. She told me, she said: "Patricia, I come to be reminded. I come because I need to be reminded." "Reminded of what?", I asked. "Of what's really important, of what matters. Of how to stay sane and human and loving and generous and good."

The week we've just lived through together is not over. Votes are still being counted across the country. The pain and trauma of the Borderline deaths will endure for a lifetime. Hundreds of thousands of our neighbors are still evacuated this morning as the fires continue to rage.

And we, gathered here to remember, to be reminded, and to recommit are grateful, yet again, for the opportunity to choose how we will live the life gifted to us and the kind of person we will be.

For "Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life...makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow."

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Notes:

This Stewardship Sermon Series is based on Diana Butler Bass' book: *Grateful—The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*. New York: HarperOne, 2018.

Michelle Vartan. "Change Your Clock and Self." *LA Times*. Nov. 3, 2018.

Times Staff. "A Trusted Place." *LA Times*. Friday, Nov. 9. 2018.

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