

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC
10:55 a.m. Sunday, October 14, 2007

Text: II Corinthians 5:7 Mark 12:41-44 NRSV

Goal: To persuade the congregation to tithe and give sacrificially.

Central thought: We tithe and give sacrificially because we love God and the Church.

"Journey of Faith: Walking in the Light of Christ"

Opening prayer: O God, open our hearts and minds to receive your words of truth for us today. Amen.

WHAT TO GIVE AND WHY

Maureen Pratt was serving as an usher at her church in California one Sunday. She was helping to receive the offering. She passed the basket from one row to another. She noticed that the adults dropped their money into the basket almost mechanically, but the children were very eager. One boy nearly fell over in the pew as he tried to extend his short, chubby arm to put his crumpled bill in the fast-moving basket!

Maureen began to think about her own attitude toward giving: *Do I leap at the chance to put my offering in the basket, or do I drop it in mechanically? Is my giving a joyful sacrifice or a scheduled chore?*

Every time we have the opportunity to give to God it is a cause for celebration and an opportunity to praise God. The psalmist proclaims, "I will sacrifice a freewill offering to you. I will praise your name, O Lord, for it is good." (Psalm 54:6) To be able

to give to God through the church is a blessing.

In a sermon two weeks ago, I posed several questions to help us determine where we are on our journey of faith with God: What do you think about? How do you spend your time? Where do you spend your money?

Another question: How do we walk in the light of Christ, in the path that is God's will for us? By our thoughts, our actions and our investments or expenditures honoring Jesus Christ. By reflecting the values of Christ.

Today is Celebration Sunday in our Journey of Faith stewardship campaign. Today we consider what to give to God's work through Duke Memorial United Methodist Church, and why.

When I think of people who have witnessed to me about what to give, I think of Emma Cooke. Emma was an elderly widow with no children who had a deep, abiding faith in God. She lived in a small, simple home. She read the Bible every day. She attended the Bessie Boseman Sunday School class and worship at Enfield United Methodist Church every Sunday, and she tithed her meager Social Security check. She gave 10% of her check to God through the ministry of the church.

When I would visit Emma at her home in the wintertime, we would sit in the center room of the house where the furnace vent was located. It was the warmest room in the house. Emma could not afford to keep all of her home warm.

When she was in her late 80s, her health declined to the point that she had to move to the Convalescent Center of Enfield. I remember visiting with her about a month before she was to move. One of the things that bothered her the most about moving to the nursing center was that now her Social Security check would go directly to the nursing center. She would no longer be able to tithe. Tithing was an important way for Emma to express her faith in Christ.

Our giving is a significant part of our Christian witness. Dr. Hilbert Berger was pastor of Aldersgate United Methodist Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana. One Sunday he prayed a prayer of dedication for the offering that he had read in the *Journal of Stewardship*. After the service, the choir director came to him. He pleaded with Berger never to pray a prayer like that again, saying that its message was so clear and dramatic that it had destroyed the mood of the choir. They couldn't sing following such a prayer. This is the prayer he prayed: "O Lord, no matter what we say or what we do, Here is what we think of You. Amen."

I have never used that prayer because some of its assumptions are not necessarily true. However, there is a nugget of truth in that prayer. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matthew 6:21) We invest more in the people, things and causes we care about, and we care more about the people, things and causes we invest in. When we give money to God, we draw closer to God. If a person invests \$10,000 in a particular stock, he will be very interested in how that stock performs. If a person invests \$10,000 in Duke Memorial UMC, he will be very interested in the mission and ministry of our congregation.

A FAITHFUL WIDOW

Our gospel lesson today speaks to this issue of what to give and why. What did the faithful widow give? Why did she give such a sacrificial offering?

One day Jesus was at the Temple in Jerusalem. He entered the Court of the Women which also housed the Treasury. Thirteen brazen receptacles shaped like trumpets lined the walls. Worshipers put coins into one group of the trumpets and offerings of goods into the others. Jesus watches as people put money into the receptacles. Many rich people put in large sums of money.

Then a poor widow approaches a receptacle. She puts in two small copper coins, which were worth a penny. These copper coins were the smallest coins circulated. 64 pennies equaled one *denarius* or a day's wage.

Then Jesus calls his disciples and tells them, "Truly I tell you." (That phrase means listen very carefully to the next part.) "This poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury." (Mark 12:43) Some of the disciples may have wanted to tell him, "Lord, we need to get you a calculator. Haven't you seen some of the people who have given such large sums?"

Then Jesus explains what he means. "All of them contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." (Mark 12:44)

This account teaches us the principle of proportionate giving – giving to God in proportion to our income. That is why we have included a percentage giving chart in our financial commitment card this year. We could make it very simple and say, "Everybody give \$5,000 next year." That would not be right or fair or biblical. For some people that would be too much. For many people that would be too little.

The poor widow gave two copper coins, all that she had to live on. Why did this widow give such an offering? Perhaps she gave because she loved God deeply. She may have been grateful to God for sustaining her through the heartbreaking days following the death of her husband. Those of us who have experienced the death of a spouse may be able to relate to this gratitude for God's sustaining care. She may be thankful to God for devoted children who do all they can to give their mother food to eat, clothing to wear and shelter in their home.

Perhaps this poor widow gave because she loved the Temple. Perhaps a kind priest or a compassionate scribe had helped her with some food. Perhaps some other

widows who were devoted to God had enveloped her with love during her grief. We might call them first-century Stephen Ministers. They had helped to save her life – spiritually, emotionally and physically – and she was so grateful!

I believe that this widow gave because she loved God and loved God's people. It is hard to love without giving – giving our time, giving our prayers, giving our money.

Imagine a man who gets his paycheck. He goes to a store and buys a \$1,000 suit and a \$200 pair of shoes. He eats dinner at one of the finest restaurants. He attends a professional football game. Then he stops by a rummage sale and buys his wife a second-hand dress which he was able to purchase for \$3.97, singing all the way, "I love my Mary Jane. I love my Mary Jane. I really do. Yes, I do. I do."

Do you believe that man? Do you believe him when he says he loves his wife? His actions make you wonder, don't they?

OUR OPPORTUNITY

We tithe and give sacrificially because we love God and the Church. When I give a tithe and beyond to God's work in the world, then I don't spend money on some other things. Tithing causes most people to prioritize their expenditures. When you tithe, God and God's work naturally become a priority.

Too often money for charitable giving comes out of the surplus after personal expenses are met. Those "necessary" expenses usually include many extras in terms of entertainment, clothes, food and toys, including toys for adults. By the time we purchase all of that, often we end up giving God the leftovers, like the man buying his wife a \$3.97 dress.

Tithing demonstrates that God is first in our lives. It is a tangible spiritual discipline, a way of expressing our love for God.

Gordon Cosby was the pastor of a small congregation in a railroad town, just outside of Lynchburg, Virginia, over 50 years ago. A deacon sent for him one day, and told him that he wanted Cosby's help. He said, "We have in our church a widow with six children. I have looked at the records and discovered that she is putting into the treasury of the church each month \$4.00 – a tithe of her income. Of course, she is unable to do this. We want you to go and talk to her and let her know that she needs to feel no obligation whatsoever, and free her from the responsibility.

Gordon went and told her of the concern of the deacons. He told her as graciously and as supportively as he knew how that she was relieved of the responsibility of giving. As he talked with her, tears came into her eyes. Then she replied, "I want to tell you that you are taking away the last thing that gives my life dignity and meaning."

Gordon tried to retrieve the situation. He couldn't do it. He went home and pondered the story of Jesus in the temple watching the people place their offerings in the collection trumpets. Jesus' attitude amazed him. Jesus had the audacity to watch what people were putting in the collection. Not only did he have the audacity to watch, he had the audacity to comment. Of the rich who put in large sums he said, "They put in what they can easily afford." Of the poor widow who dropped in two coins, he said, "She in her poverty, who needs so much, has given away everything, her whole living." Gordon asked himself, "What would I have done? I know. I would have told her, 'Let us take this to the deacons. We have a sensible group that always makes exceptions, and I know that they will relieve you of your discipline of giving.'"

I am grateful for the witness of Gordon's Cosby's parishioner, of the poor, faithful widow at the Temple in Jerusalem, of Emma Cooke and other people, because they teach me what to give and why to give it.

In his message to us last month, Shane Claiborne said that the Church is like Noah's Ark. Sometimes it stinks, with all of the animals on it, but if you jump off the boat, you will drown. The Church is the Body of Christ. The Church is the primary vehicle Christ uses to express his love to the world. I want to help love people through our church.

Last Sunday we had this incredible Ministry Parade that highlighted many of the ministries that our church performs. To honor Christ, to further his mission in our world, we generously and sacrificially support his Church. I think that the faithful widow knew that deep in her heart.

A member of our congregation told me last week about the wonderful community of love and support that she experiences in our church. I have the wonderful vantage point of seeing the impact of this church's ministry on people every day. It is marvelous! I want to support that.

Melody and I have been praying about our financial commitment to Duke Memorial Church for next year. We now have two children in college. One of our goals for the past 21 years has been to save, so that Andy and Sarah – through a combination of scholarships, grants, their earnings and our support – could complete an undergraduate education with no debt. So we have some other commitments besides Duke Memorial Church.

Today's sermon has been about what to give and why. Here is what it is for Melody and me. Melody and I are going to tithe our income in 2008 to Duke Memorial United Methodist Church. We are going to check the first box on the commitment card. That is what we are going to give – 10% of our income. This is why – because we love God and we love Duke Memorial United Methodist Church. We invite you to join us in the adventure of tithing today. Amen.