

Sermon preached by the Reverend Hope H. Eakins
St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT
November 11, 2018 – Commitment Sunday
Proper 27, Year B

One of the great joys of my life is being able to give away some of what I have, to support the Church I believe in and to contribute to schools that have educated me and to provide music in this community. It IS more blessed to give than to receive because you feel good inside when you give. One of the deepest pains of being poor, I think, is feeling like you don't have enough to share, that you have so little that you can't give any of it away. Jesus wanted to teach us about the joy of giving, too, and so he teaches us about that joy in the parable of the widow's mite. Here are some of the lessons:

First, there is a cost to being one of Jesus' disciples. Christian discipleship requires giving ALL that we have to God. All that we have. The widow's mite is not a story about tithing ten percent but about giving one hundred percent to God. The widow's story is a story of extravagance and immoderate generosity. The woman knows the Law; she knows that Jews are required to give the first fruits of their lives, to give ten per cent off the top to the temple, but she gives 100%. Jesus is telling us that God wants far more than a tithe, that God demands everything of us, demands ALL that we have. But you can relax, Jesus does not tell us to transfer our whole bank account to St. John's Church, but to recognize that even if we tithe and give away 10% of what we have, we are still not free to take the other 90% to Foxwoods, because all that we have belongs to God, and God holds us responsible for how we use everything.

Secondly, we have an obligation to support Christ's body, the Church. The church is a human institution and so it is not perfect. As a matter of fact, Jesus calls the temple a den of thieves. The temple was unworthy to receive the widow's mite, and the Church is unworthy to receive your gifts too, but no matter how fallible the institution, God can and will find the good in it and use it to carry out God's work. The widow knows the lesson we all must learn - that even though the church is composed of people like us who don't always do the right thing, it is the best we've got. We work and pray for God to revive the Church, but we also have to support it in the meantime, because imperfect as we may be, the needy still come to our doors, young couples come to make their marriage vows, sinners come to seek forgiveness, children come to learn their prayers, families come to bury their dead, and we must never ever turn them away.

Third, we should never give to look good; we should give to feel good. In the Gospel story, the Temple is crowded with the wealthy, ostentatiously putting their gifts into the treasury. It is show time. Their gestures are designed to earn brownie points under the Law, to impress their friends, to gain social recognition, and even to control the institution through their giving. The widow gives in secret, and Jesus says that she has given more than all the others. Secrecy, however, must be for the right reasons. Too many Episcopalians ardently support the confidentiality of their pledges because the privacy of the system allows them to conceal the meagerness of their giving. A man whom I will call John terrorized his parish with his outspoken opinions and criticisms. John almost always got his way, because people were afraid of losing his pledge, which, on paper, was very large. What people did not know was that although John made large pledges he never paid them.

Fourth, more is required of those who have more. This is the principle of proportional giving. It is a privilege to be blessed with riches not because you can buy fancy cars with them, but because that blessing allows you to help God redeem the world. The average pledge at St. John's Church is \$1700 a year, \$32 a week, and that is a generous pledge, but the average pledge for Episcopalians in the USA is \$1877 a year, or \$36 a week. It seems to me that we could at least increase our pledges to be average.

Fifth, everybody can give something, even if it is only a mite. The poor know that better than the rich. In every study of philanthropic giving, the poorer you are, the greater percent of your assets you give away. The poor share what they have. Far too often the rich do not; they give nothing if they cannot give a large sum, for pride is the besetting sin of the rich.

Sixth, everybody counts, no matter what they give. Their gifts matter because they matter. Sometimes we forget this. In a certain Episcopal Church, the financial secretary has insisted that no more offering envelopes be given to the children. Counting and tracking the coins is not worth it, she says, and she is wrong. And in my parents' church the Rector once announced that he did not want any more coins or dollar bills put into the alms basin. "If you can't afford to give a five or more, you can't afford to give," he said, and he was wrong too.

Seventh, Jesus tells us to give from joy. Not to get a tax deduction, not because the economy is up, not because you've got something left over after you have paid the bills - give because giving brings you happiness, because it tickles you pink, because you are grateful that you have enough to give, because when you pour yourself out you never feel so alive.

Eighth, trust God. The widow in the parable certainly does. A young woman came to a parish I served in need of food and shelter. I heard her story and had the funds to find her a place to stay, because my parish was generous about providing for such things. I called her parents' home and got her a bus ticket to go there. Before she left, she opened her wallet. "I have \$41.26," she said, "and I would like to give \$5 to the Church." "No," I protested. "You'll need that much for food on the trip." "You don't understand," she said, "even if I kept the \$5, I wouldn't have enough, so I want to give something to God to show that I trust him." That day my parish received a widow's mite.

Ninth, give with no expectation of return. Christian stewardship is not buying something. That is why we don't have separate fund drives for separate causes. You cannot choose whether you want to support the Sunday School or the fuel bill or outreach. You are asked to give to support God's ministry in the world, a world that is far bigger than this parish.

Tenth, don't give anything if it doesn't come from the heart. I visited an elderly woman once and saw a lovely bouquet of flowers on her table. She told me that her son had a standing order at the local florist. She rarely sees her son, but the florist delivers a dozen pink roses on her birthday, a red poinsettia at Christmas, stargazer lilies on the day of her husband's death, yellow tulips at Easter, and so forth. "The flowers are beautiful," she said, "but I remember when he used to bring me frogs in his lunchbox and crumpled drawings in his pockets and when he held out his cookies to share with me." And then she whispered, "I wish I could call the florist and cancel the order because the flowers just make me miss my boy."

God does not like being on the receiving end of such gestures either. God would prefer our attention, our lives, rather than burnt offerings and empty rituals. You know, it *would* be a lot easier for parish treasurers if all church pledges were paid up front with an annual check. That way, the church would have an accurate budget and wouldn't have to keep track of weekly contributions. But I don't think God likes it that way. I think God prefers it if we open our wallets each week and decide how much we can give, and put it in an envelope and feel it in our pocket as we carry it to church, consecrated money, dedicated money, money we didn't spend on a hamburger or a magazine or gasoline because we decided to give it to God.

If we are created in the image of God, and we are, we are created to be givers. It is through our giving that we become most like the extravagant God who pours out blessings upon this world not because we earn them but simply because God loves us. God wants us to know the joy of giving like that, giving extravagantly and exuberantly and immoderately and abundantly, giving not until we hurt but until we feel good.

So let us all take a moment of silence right now and open our hearts and open our minds and open our hands to consider how to support this remarkable parish, to consider how much we should give, how much we can give, in order to feel good.