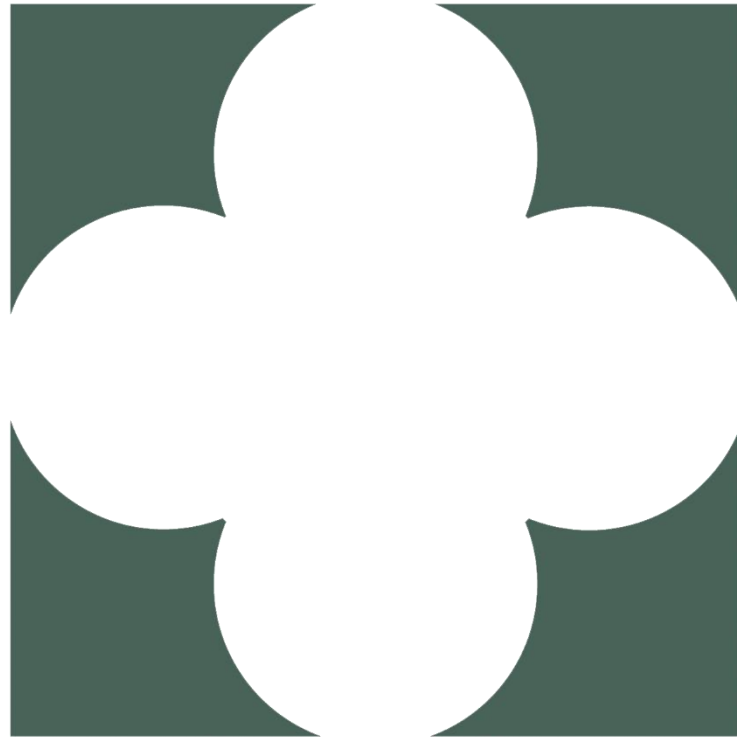


# What Can We Offer?

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seattle first baptist

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Mark 12: 38-44

What is the best gift you've ever gotten? A piece of jewelry? A trip somewhere? A relationship you treasure? A childhood toy? An experience you will never forget? A letter that was surprisingly kind?

What makes it the best? Is it the price tag? The time and energy that went into it? The way it shows that the giver knows you just-so-well? The emotional resonance you feel with it? Is it the best because of the person who gave it to you?

Our Scripture passage today, often called The Widow's Mite, is often read during stewardship season when we are talking about gifts. Specifically, giving financially to the church. A common preaching of this scripture holds the up as a paragon of virtuous giving to the religious institutions.

And surely, there are aspects of this story to appreciate in this way--and there are countless stories about the ways women, particularly elders, sustain the church with their finances, giving selflessly so that the legacy of the gospel would continue. Another aspect to appreciate is the image of extravagant generosity--which mirrors our relationship with our Creator, the One who created all good gifts in this life! Extravagant generosity surely is a beautiful lesson to lift up during a season of stewardship, particularly in one of the wealthiest cities in the wealthiest country on Earth....right?

But I think there is more to this passage than praising the widow's gift. The thing about this text is that there are no feeling words attributed to Jesus as he tells this story. All we know is that Jesus is in the temple with his disciples. He

comments on the hypocrisy of the scribes, or we might think of them in our context as the religious leaders or church council, who like to parade their piety around for all to see. He says specifically “for the sake of appearances” say long prayers...not truly out of their dedication to their tradition do they say long prayers, but just to make sure they are seen doing it!

And then, immediately following this observation of the scribes, Jesus watches people putting coins into the treasury. He sees the wealthy putting in lots of money. And then he sees this widow giving two small coins, and says she is giving just as much, even more, than people who are wealthy. Remember that the Hebrew Bible talks about the care of widows and orphans in many places--providing for the members of society with the least resources is a primary tenet of Jewish practice!

“You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan,” God says in Exodus 22, after the people have been brought out of slavery in Egypt. “If you do mistreat them, I will heed their cry as soon as they cry out to Me, and My anger shall blaze forth and I will put you to the sword, and your own wives shall become widows and your children orphans (Exodus 22:21-3).”

So regarding Jesus’ commentary on the widow herself, there’s no proof in the text that Jesus was praising her or condemning her, there are no adverbs that show his emotion as he spoke to his disciples...and so in the spirit of Pastor Tim’s sermon last week, encouraging us to be courageous and ask daring questions, we can wonder about the purpose of Jesus’ observation with his disciples. In the

Feasting on the Word commentary, Pete Peery wonders, “Does Jesus point to the poor widow who gives her last two coins to the temple as a model for giving? Or does Jesus point to her because she is a tragic example of how religious institutions suck the life out of people?”

We can wonder about the way that people have chosen to interpret this story over the years, and what that interpretation would have allowed them to do. There are always multiple interpretations of any story, and it is important to dig deeper than the surface and question how people, and institutions, benefit from any particular telling of a story.

Likewise, we must wonder about interpretations that praise this woman’s sacrifice and put her on a pedestal as an example of giving. Why would it be beneficial for churches to encourage a poor widow to give “all she had” to the offering? Would it be good for a capital campaign, or estate gifts, to uphold this virtuous woman who gave extravagantly out of her poverty?

We can wonder about the situations in any religious organization that result in a widow, someone who was already on the outskirts of society, who was supposed to be cared for, entering a place where people are “devouring” her house and giving “all she has.” Or, as one commentator said about this text, “The question is not why she is giving her only coin to the Temple, but why there is a widow in Jerusalem with only one coin.”

We also must be honest about how this text has been used to condone antisemitism by denigrating the temple practices. This kind of interpretation lends itself to a narrative of Christian practice being superior to Jewish practice--which has perpetuated the oppression of Jewish peoples until this day!

Commonly preachers uplift this woman's giving because it was such a great sacrifice--and Christians are all about sacrifice, right? Jesus' life, sacrificed on the cross. The lives of the earliest saints of the church, martyred in a sacrifice for the faith. Many of us are from traditions within the Christian family that lift up again and again the importance of being a "servant leader," encouraging us to emulate Christ by giving of ourselves. The Women's Commentary on Mark 12, which I usually resonate with and trust, even says that the significance of the widow giving "all she has" is that she is giving "her whole life," just as Jesus will a few chapters later in Mark's gospel. But whenever you hear someone glorifying sacrifice, I hope a little caution flag pops up in your brain. Womanist theologian Rev. Dr. emilie m. townes writes in the Feasting on the Word commentary: "Sacrifice is a dangerous notion. It is dangerous because we often ask those who are the most vulnerable to give the most. A quick reading of this passage encourages our doing so once again."

So, now that we are familiar with some of the complexities in this text, here are some things I like and don't like.

- I like that we are led by the church calendar to think about saints and about giving at the same time. I like reflecting on questions like "who taught you to give? What is giving? What does it feel like when you give?"

- I don't like the glorification of giving that leaves the giver desolate.
- I like that, Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, renowned New Testament scholar, draws this lesson from the widow who gives "all she has": "the temple is a place where both rich and poor contribute." That is good news. Every single person can participate in the church, participate in the ministry of the church, no matter what they are giving. No person's gift is more highly valued than another's. Each and every one of you here today, whether you are in person or online or watching this later, has something to offer.
- I don't like how interpretations of this passage have led to antisemitism. I agree with Rodger Y. Nishioka in his commentary on this passage, "The attack [Jesus makes with his observation of hypocrisy] is not on Jewish religious practice. The attack is on any religious practice that masks egotism and greed."
- I like the lesson of extravagant generosity and the challenge to think about what that means for our own giving to our neighbors, our church and our community.
- I don't like how these lessons can be easily co-opted into a paradigm that makes it desirable for the most vulnerable among us to give a larger share while the privileged stay comfortable. Does this sound familiar at all?

Whew, this is complicated! Beloved church, yes it is. And so, given all of these questions, all of the various ways this story can be and has been interpreted over the last two thousand years, why would we choose to preach on this during stewardship season? Why is it an appropriate text for All

## Saints' Day?

Because giving is important. And because we are only here because the saints who have gone before us have given to this congregation. But wait! Before you write off this sermon as “yet another sermon trying to get into my pocketbook,” let me admit something. I don't like talking about money. It is not something I was taught to do well. But I also want to be clear about what I mean when I talk about giving: it's not just about the numbers in a bank account.

Church is about more than giving money, and so is stewardship season. Yes, I'm sure there are a number of you in the pews who on your most cynical days have felt jaded by how churches talk about money. But it is also a reality that this congregation, Seattle First Baptist Church, is a privileged church. Not all churches can lift up stewardship season lightly, not when they are literally trying to keep the lights on. I wonder how a church in that kind of position would feel about the widow's offering.

It's true--there are many different ways churches handle stewardship season--some with a thermometer measuring how much people give, some by publishing the names and amounts of people's tithes, and even, historically, some churches assigned seating based on who gave the most to the church! I

wonder, when reading this whole passage, from the woe to the scribes to the observation of the widow's gift, how those churches would feel about the warning against those who enjoy the benefits of social status?

So, let's be honest with each other: Money is a tender subject for many of us, and, despite my hesitations about this passage, I find some promise in this story.

Bob Ekblad, a Presbyterian minister and co-founder of Tierra Nueva, a ministry that serves immigrants from Latin America, inmates and people struggling with housing and addiction in the Skagit Valley, wrote this in the Preaching God's Transforming Justice commentary, about a conversation he had while leading Bible study on this passage at a prison:

“In contrast to the scribes and possibly the rich, whose actions are intended to impress the people watching them, the widow is not doing anything to impress, nor is she ashamed to give so little. Through an act of bold faith, she gives rather than hoarding what little she has. “If Jesus reveals God in these stories, what is God like?” I ask the inmates.

“This story shows that the way things are, the injustices of this world, are not God's will,” a man astutely observes. “Jesus denounces the way things



are normally done, the religious' leaders' attitudes, the ways the rich give from the excess of what they have, which shows these things are not Jesus' will. Jesus is against the injustice of the scribes' devouring the widow's house. It's not Jesus' will how our unjust legal system works."

Let me echo Pastor Ekblad and ask the question again, "If Jesus reveals God in these stories, what is God like?"

God is a God who watches--watches over us and observes our social interactions. God is in the place of worship and God critiques the place of worship. God gives extravagantly through the beauty and goodness of Creation, and God calls us to be wary of any call to sacrifice "everything."

Again, Dr. emilie m. townes: "At times, it seems that sacrifice is best when someone else is doing it. We marvel at such figures as Mother Teresa, the families of slain or injured soldiers, and teachers in tough inner-city schools. We lift them high on the pedestal with the poor widow, keeping them distinct and distant from our daily lives. The focus is on *their* giving and the inadequacy of *ours*--but nothing changes. This is one of the problems of things we put on pedestals. We do not imagine ourselves alongside them

because what they represent for us is often more than we can give or more than we can imagine we are capable of giving.”

Giving to church takes many, many different forms. And as I look around at all of you, I see these types of giving reflected in you: Time, energy, prayer, passion, creativity, research, nurturing of the next generation, musical talent, humor, hospitality, listening, accountability, questioning....

So let us wonder together, beloved church, what gifts by those who have gone before are we remembering on this All Saints' Day? Perhaps the gift of prayer that grew a church throughout the years. Perhaps the gift of foresight, that purchased this plot of land and called us to serve our neighborhood right here on this spot. Perhaps the gift of dedication, as people throughout the last 152 years of this church have given financially as well as given their time and energy and care to build and maintain not only this beautiful building, but a community that can be known for how we extend the gifts of God's table into the world.

When talking about giving, I like to think about “meaningful gifts.” Susan Blythe Goodman and I have talked about this concept over the past few

years. Instead of setting a blanket “you SHOULD give X amount or X percentage” to whatever cause you care about, I think asking people to give meaningfully makes a difference to individuals...because what is meaningful for one person is not necessarily meaningful for others. For one person, giving \$100 may not even register as a gift--and so is that meaningful? But for another person, giving \$100 may be the most money they’ve spent in a long time, and it may even cause anxiety because there are basic needs that must be met--and so is that giving meaningful?

In our city and in our town, we do not have to look too far to see the truths Jesus observed in this story: time and again, we see that lower- and middle-class folks routinely pay more in taxes than wealthier people. We learn that it is expensive to be poor--from paying for healthcare and emergency room services out of pocket to the high physical toll that manual labor costs to the cost of less time with family because working more hours to pay for childcare decreases the amount of time people actually spend with children. And, in the wake of recent political pressure to leave out family leave and childcare from federal policy, there are many, many more examples of the expenses that living close to the poverty line incurs.

In this season of stewardship, we must balance what it means to give of ourselves as well as what it means to care for each other with radical

hospitality, the way the saints of old have done. We ask questions the saints of the church have asked before, like why is it that some people are pressured to give “all they have” and how do we not only preserve our history, but let it propel us into the future. The saints in our collective history have shown us how to be good stewards of our communities, how to serve the marginalized, how to listen and learn with grace. And so let us give to each other and give to our church not because we are scared of what will happen if we don’t or because we are trying to make our way into heaven or because we were taught that’s what we are “supposed to do,” but let us give because the cause is meaningful, because we stand upon the saints of the church and we ourselves are saints in training. Let us give of ourselves with generosity, sharing our abundance in radical ways that outwit the systems of domination that we are born into and tricked into upholding, and stewarding the message of the gospel with radical love and grace. Dr. townes says, “The coins represent faith-filled offering found in presenting all of who we are and all we hope to become to God for service to the world. Indeed, offering in this sense is something other than prayer, tithes, Eucharist, or Communion. It is not so much the act of giving or receiving, as it is the act of being.” When we give, we are offering ourselves--our unique-ness, our life experiences, our questions, our skills, our doubts, our ways of learning--these gifts are deeply meaningful to our community.

Friends, you are not only surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, but you are among the saints of the church right here and now. Sometimes we feel like

we are not enough, like we are not good enough or smart enough or wealthy enough or powerful enough...but my friends, you are here, and you are the church right now. And this church has been called by God to be here today together, and this church has been made possible by all those saints we called the names of earlier, and made possible by all the ways each of you live out the gospel each and every day. You, who set the table for communion. You, who arrange the flowers for worship. You, who make sure there's toilet paper in the bathroom and lightbulbs in the fixtures. You, who work on the bylaws. You, who practice your music for worship. You, who love God with your mind while doing Bible study. You, who show up at rallies and put your body on the line to protest unjust causes. You, who are sitting at your school desk, learning all you can about the world so you can love your neighbor better. You, who host Zoom meetings for people who are lonely. You, who we haven't heard from in a while, but who we still love and think of. You are among the saints of the church. You are here and now, you are giving your heart to the ministry in and with this community, you are tasked with tuning in to what God is calling SFBC to do. And you, out there, in the pews or online, you are not alone.

Beloved church, let us go forward in faith, remembering the saints who have gone before, who have given so much so that we could be here right now, and dedicating ourselves to giving of ourselves for the church of tomorrow.

May it ever be so. Amen.