

“Acts of Giving: All to God”

Mark 12:38-44

Twenty-fourth Sunday After Pentecost

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Christ the King Lutheran Church

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In 1997, billionaire broadcaster Ted Turner decided he would give a billion dollars to the United Nations Foundation. A Billion Dollars. With a B. That is a lot of money. And while, no, he didn't just sit down and write out a check for a billion dollars—I believe he actually gave it over the course of about 10 or even 15 years—no matter how you slice it, that is a lot of money. When he was asked about the gift—and particularly about the size of the gift—Turner's responses were very interesting, to say the least. “Why a billion?” one journalist asked him. “A billion just seemed like a nice round number,” Turner replied. Why not, in other words. “When I got my statement in January,” he said, “I was worth \$2.2 billion. Then I got another statement in August that said I was worth \$3.2 billion. So I figure its only [eight or] nine months' earnings, who cares?” Yeah, exactly...who cares? Speaking later with Larry King, Turner said about this gift, “You know, I'm no poorer than I was nine months ago, and the world is much better off.”¹

Well as you can imagine, lots of folks quickly jumped on Ted Turner, not for the gift he was preparing to give, but for the way he choose to talk about the gift. Lots of journalists—maybe not at CNN or TBS, but elsewhere in the news world—lots of journalists seemed to pounce on his remarks. They found his words to be elitist, tone-deaf, out-of-touch, even callous. “Ted Turner's about to give away a Billion dollars and he's not even going to miss it,” they mocked. Sure, it's a generous gift, by anyone else's standard; he's hardly going to notice the change, they said.

Generous as it was, after all, as much good as it ended up doing, this was, of course, on some level nothing more than creative accounting, they said. A publicity stunt. A tax write-off. Or maybe they heard echoes of Jesus' words from today's gospel “For they have all have contributed out of their abundance.” They have all given abundantly, Jesus seems to say, but they hardly even noticed it. They have all given generously, he declares to his disciples, but some of them won't even miss it. But she, Jesus says, the widow, the one who gave her two last coins—she, out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on. She has given her whole living. Her whole life. **She** has given it all away—given it all to God.

She gave her whole life, Jesus says. Not a portion. Not a percentage. Not a tithe. Not even a generous portion given over ten or fifteen years. No, she gave everything. Everything she had to live on. She gave her whole living.

Over the years, this story has been used as an example of giving—generous, selfless, sacrificial giving. She has been held up as an example, especially at this time of the year, as we consider our own financial stewardship and make plans for next year. [I did not, but the way, choose the text for today; this was the text assigned in the lectionary...] But hers is a difficult example to hold up, really. As Professor Karoline Lewis points out in “Working Preacher,” the truth is, none of us can give as much as she did to the church, or to anyone or

¹ “Ted Turner donates \$1 billion to 'U.N. causes,’” www.cnn.com, September 19, 1997, accessed November 7, 2015.

anything, for that matter. So we need to be careful not to reduce her donation by turning her offering into an example for the sake of our stewardship campaign—or else we truly miss the point of the story. Because Jesus’ message about the woman is this: She gave her whole life to God.²

Others, have pointed out that as generous as this widow’s gift seems at first, she also seems to be offering it out of—for lack of better word—desperation. As Jesus begins this gospel passage by criticizing the scribes and other elite classes who, despite their deeming religiosity profit from the misery of others, devouring widows’ houses we are told, and otherwise abusing the poor. Against this backdrop of harsh words Jesus points out this woman, who offers a gift that is at once generous and fool-harder. She is surrendering both to God’s will and to the mercy of the temple that she hopes will now take care of her.

But beyond either seeing this woman on the one hand as an example of generosity or seeing her desperate state on the other as a critique of society then or now, this woman’s witness stands quite simply as an invitation—her offering is an invitation to follow Jesus. Jesus holds her up as a way for us to imagine yet again what the kingdom of God looks like. And that kingdom. Jesus tells us, that kingdom of God starts with **our whole life lives** given to God. Again, as Professor Lewis says, “This is the essence of God -- to give God’s whole self. And here, now, in this widow, God is doing it again. God calls us to whole life living. That’s what discipleship is all about.”³

In that light, in the light of the whole-life living, and whole-life giving that God in Jesus Christ calls us to, I wonder if we could also read Ted Turner’s gift—and his words about his gift—in another, more favorable way. I wonder if we gave Mr. Turner the benefit of the doubt—which, believe me, is not always something that I find easy to do for folks of his overwhelming wealth and power. I wonder though: how else could we see this? Despite his lack of self-awareness, despite his “aw shucks” minimizing of the enormity of his gift, could he actually have been saying the following about himself, and perhaps even urging others to consider about themselves? **I could be helping so much more. I could be doing so much more. I could be giving so much more.** I wonder if his reflection that he hardly even noticed so great a sum of money leaving his accounts was his way of wondering out loud if he was really doing as much as he could do, helping as much as he could held, giving as much of himself as he could give.

See, the truth is, there is always so much more that we could be doing. So much more help we could be providing. So much more that we could be giving. And I’m not even talking about increasing your pledge here at CtK in order to expand the ministry we are going about here together. No, I’m talking about something much, much more. Something more basic, something more fundamental, something—paradoxically—more central to who we are as human beings, something more intrinsic to who we are as people of God, followers of Jesus, disciples of Christ.

² Karoline Lewis, “Whole Life Living,” www.workingpreacher.org, accessed November 4, 2015.

³ *Ibid.*

I'm talking about giving our whole lives to God, like the widow in our gospel text today. I'm talking about surrendering our own wills to God's will, made known to us most completely in Jesus Christ. I'm talking about giving of ourselves in many little and big ways to one another, and to the world around us. I'm talking about the ways we live out our lives as disciples of Christ—the dozens and even hundreds and thousands of ways that we give of ourselves, of our time, of our energy, and, yes, of our money, in service to others, as signs of God's love, signs of God's generous and abundant giving to us. If we give our whole lives to God, and if we live our lives—our whole lives—as generous offerings, given in response to the ways God has already so richly and abundantly blessed us, just think of how much more we could end up giving. Imagine how much more we could do in Christ's name. Visualize the help that could be provided, the good that could be done, the lives that could be changed by our giving—by giving our whole lives to God, in service of God's mission.

If you look at the end of your pews you'll see baskets, and in the baskets are pencils and papers shaped like a pair of hands. I'd like you now to each take one of those papers and pencils and think for a moment or two about one tangible way that each of you feel called to give. To give of yourself. To give something to someone else. Maybe it's something very specific that you can give to someone very specific. Maybe it's an actual thing you can offer up to someone in your community, your neighborhood, your family, this church. Maybe it's a hug or a high five or a kind word or a card to someone who really needs encouragement. Maybe you can give an action—something like raking your neighbor's yard, or shoveling their driveway when that first snow finally comes or reading to a neighbor kid or helping her with her homework. Maybe it is money for the Good Samaritan Fund, or food to the food shelf. Whatever it is, think of something you can give. Think right now, think of someone you might be able to give something to. Write it down on the hands paper. Write your name on it—or don't if you don't want to, that's okay, too. Some of us need to be held accountable differently than others of us do. Reflect for just a little while on one tangible thing that you can give sometime in the very near future. That is your offering. That is one of your offerings, anyway. That is one of the ways you are an offering, we are an offering. Go ahead, write it down on the hands' papers.

In a few minutes, then, you will be asked to bring your offerings as a physical, tangible, mobile act of worship. You will be invited, as you make your way front or back towards communion to bring with you any or all of these three things: today's offering, your completed 2016 pledge form, and this sheet of hand-shaped paper, on which you have written or will soon write one thing that you believe you can give.

Notice—we won't have our usual offering today. Today, after the prayers and the peace, we'll sing and remind ourselves that today, and everyday that we live as disciples of God we are an offering. Today, we're combining our act of giving with God's great act of giving. I invite you to come and place in the big, flat baskets at either end of the sanctuary the offerings you have. And then, once you have emptied your hands in this act of giving, open your hands and receive. Receive the living God, the body and blood of the risen Christ. Yes, I know, it actually works the other way around—we receive from God's abundance and so we can generously give in return.

But for today, as you give these tangible signs of your offering, your pledge and your own giving hands, receive once again your life given back to you, a life flowing on in endless song. Receive a new creation. Receive the peace of Christ. Receive Christ's inmost calm. Give, receive, and give again—give it all to God. Amen.