

Winning the Lottery

A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on Sunday, 8 November 2009, the twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 27) based upon Mark 12:38-44.

There's a reason so many churches have their pledge ingathering and dedication today--following that story from Mark's gospel one is hard-pressed not to be a bit more generous. Last Sunday was ours, when nearly 150 households returned a pledge card. Thank you! And for those of you who haven't yet done so, all the better, because *today* is your day.

Last March the Stewardship Officer for the Diocese of Vermont spent a morning with the vestry of the parish I used to serve. It was a retreat of sorts, and what Angie did was to ask each of us to explain what it means to give. Then she asked us to talk about a person who modeled giving in our lives. The stories were funny, and they were powerful.

One woman talked about how her depression-era parents received their paychecks every Friday; every Friday night they'd put 10% of their pay into an envelop marked "church." A new member of the vestry, financially secure and successful in business, talked about how for him the most rewarding part of this stage of life is that can give money away.

I remember one phrase from that morning. A vestrywoman's uncle, who had grown up poor, used to always say, "If you've got your happiness, you're rich as Rockefeller." The phrase points to a strange kind of peace that people who live close to the financial edge seem to know.

What the stewardship officer was trying to get us to see is what many of you already know: generosity comes from gratitude, and gratitude comes when we know deep in our hearts that everything we have and own is given to us--whether it's the air we breathe, the talents we employ, the family we're bringing up; the lucky breaks we've been given. Generous people seem to know that they're part of a chain of giving and receiving, and that their part is to pass on what they've been given.

"If you have your happiness, you're rich as Rockefeller." If we don't cling and possess, the whole world is ours to enjoy. What matters is our souls.

In the gospel this morning we see two ways of approaching life. First, we see the proud scribes, people who take prestige and power for granted, sitting at the head of every table. And then Jesus notices the rich givers as they put their money in the collection. They give publicly and proudly from what Jesus calls their abundance, from what they can offer without risking themselves.

But Jesus sees what no one else notices—a widow making her way into the temple. A widow had no place in that society; without a husband widows tended to be the poorest of the poor. But Jesus points her out to the disciples as she goes up and puts her two coins in the treasury, and something about the way she does that convinces him that this was it for her, the last of everything, and after that there was nothing left, just her and God.

"Truly I tell you," Jesus says, "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."

Some would say this widow got carried away, that she was profligate and out of control. Maybe that's what happens when we begin really to see what has been given to us—that everything, absolutely everything in our lives is given, that to have been born is to have won the lottery. If so, then our only response is to give back.

Most of us give a little here and a little there. But often it's the part we don't really want or need. Churches urge us to give proportionately, a percentage of our income, off the top, back to God. But in today's gospel Jesus points to a woman who gives a percentage all right—100%. She seemed to know something about gratitude and generosity and freedom that is hard for us to imagine. She must have heard Jesus talk about the great commandment—"You shall love the Lord your God with ALL your heart and soul and mind and strength."

These sermons about money really bug some of us. We get so mad that we fume all morning. And I can hear you say, "We come to church, Father, to get perspective for living our lives, not to hear about money."

I say, and my clergy colleagues join me, "you're absolutely right!" So let's help each other get perspective on our lives. We preach about money here because having a life of gratitude leads us to also have politics of compassion. And every single one of us needs to receive and to give more compassion. If we know that everything has been given to us, we work toward making certain everyone has a fair chance, for fair wages, for a way to welcome immigrant workers into this nation of immigrants, for responsible tax burdens which fund education and health care, and programs which care for our most desperate global neighbors.

It's not so surprising that Jesus had to point out the widow to his disciples. She's easy to miss because to see her is to see our lives differently. And Jesus himself, four days after seeing this widow, is going to put in everything himself. He won't be giving a tithe, he won't be a proportionate giver, stretching out his arms on a cross. He will be giving it all.

To give away, in gratitude and generosity, is to place ourselves within the deepest current of the universe—the flow of love and giving that comes straight from the heart of God. “For all of them contributed out of their abundance,” Jesus said. “But this woman out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living.”

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