

GRACE TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND THE LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST, AMEN.

Let me tell you a story told by a preacher's son:

*My father's church was in terrible shape. The paint was peeling. The lawn was bad—there wasn't enough money for grass seed. The hymn books were torn and tattered. Plaster had fallen from the ceiling. So my father called a meeting to raise money to do something about it and he invited, among others, the richest man in town.*

*He worked on the rich man and others too, but couldn't get any response. Finally he said, "Let us pray." And my father prayed fervently to God to give them a sign that would melt the hearts of these stony people, especially the rich man. Well, the Lord accommodated him. Just then an enormous piece of plaster fell off the wall directly onto the head of the wealthy man. He leapt to his feet and said, "I'll give \$2000." My father said, "Hit him again, Lord, hit him again."*

We can laugh at a little story like this but Jesus does speak often of the temptation of riches. He says that we cannot serve two masters—the Lord God and Mammon. Jesus tells us that “those who are given much of them much is expected” and again, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” St Augustine expanded this last verse to the following, “Where your pleasure is, there is your treasure; where your treasure is, there is your heart; where your heart is, there is your happiness.”

I remember a young man telling a group of us at a pastors' meeting about how actions speak louder than words and how people know our commitments by how we spend our time and money He said that if people looked at him they would know that his passion was hockey and a certain brand of soda pop. He had watched every University of Minnesota hockey game even out in Oregon and his refrigerator was filled with this soft drink. People may not so readily recognize, he said, that he loved young people—he was a youth minister. It was convicting to me and may be to you—substitute the Cubs or Bears for the University of Minnesota Gophers or a brand of beer for the pop. How we spend our money and

our time tells us what is the most important thing in our lives.

Now I venture to say you are all thinking, “I know where this sermon is going.” The pastor is up in the pulpit going to tell us to dig deeper. Some of you know money has been tight here at Edison Park and so the minister is going to make me feel guilty and suggest that I should give more to the church.” Folks, that will not work. We do not give because we feel guilty. I don’t know about you but the Old Adam in me is quick to find an excuse not to give. It is easy to blame something aired on public radio or the leadership in the Red Cross or the church council or the pastor and that gives me a reason for not supporting them. The Bible says, “The Lord loveth a cheerful giver.” We give because we have been given so much. We are blessed to be a blessing. We should not use shame or guilt to raise money for the church.

I would like to tell you about my faith-in-law, The Reverend Kenneth Jacobson. He is gone now but served as a Lutheran pastor in North Dakota and Nebraska for his long ministry. He always held stewardship to be a key to church attendance and participation. If people gave to the work of the church, they would care about the program and what goes on in worship. If people gave little or nothing, then their activity, attendance and study would reflect that. But if they gave, they would care. If the people’s treasure is in their church, so will be their heart and their happiness. Most congregations seek to make their worship and Sunday School and youth program and study hour and fellowship so inviting and attractive and interesting, even entertaining, that folks will come and then perhaps they will give. My father-in-law had the opposite idea: get people to give and they will come and worship and study and grow in faith.

His last congregation was American Lutheran Church in Fairbury, Nebraska. When Pastor Jacobson was called there, the congregation was worshipping in a country church which had been moved into town many years before. They had squabbled for decades and never seemed to be able to decide to build an adequate building. Well, under my father-in-law, they did. They built an impressive brick building, then added a bell tower and then put in a pipe organ—and they paid off the mortgage in ten years. Southeastern Nebraska is not a wealthy area and has declined in population, but the people were committed and their congregation thrived and still does. The people of American Lutheran Church give well and attend well. One of the keys to their successful stewardship is recognizing that

giving is not a secret. The congregation publishes what each family gives in the annual report. The first time I saw this I was surprised, even shocked. Everyone in the church could see what everyone else was giving. It was explained to me that the purpose was not to shame the poor widow who had very little to give or the wealthier person of whom much was expected and who gave much. What it did do was reveal very clearly those who had much to give and gave very little. I suppose just the thought of publishing the giving caused quite a number of people to put their money where their mouth was. I am not advocating this for Edison Park Lutheran Church—please don't get me wrong—but I do know that other charitable groups, the hospitals, the symphony, the opera, colleges, publish giving by category. It is clear that some people give \$100 a year, \$500 a year or \$1000 or more. There is no secret about this. I also know that St. Paul lists giving with liberality among the spiritual gifts. If we thank Sunday School teachers or musicians and council members—and we don't thank them enough—then we should also thank those who give generously and sacrificially.

Our text for this Sunday speaks of those who parade their piety, who wear long robes and expect places of honor in the synagogues, who pray long prayers and yet prey upon widows. Jesus contrasts these Scribes—leaders of religion—with the widow who gave her mite—two coins worth  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a penny. Even though she gave very little and the Scribes and Pharisees tossed greater sums into the money boxes in the Temple, Jesus says that the religious leaders gave of their superfluity and she of her all: “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.” The Scribes gave what they had left over after they bought their robes and best seats and places of honor at banquets. They gave from their abundance while the widow gave all she had—the Greek word is BIOS, like our word biology—she gave her very life.

The text is really not about how generous this woman was—though that is how we usually interpret it. It is rather a lament for the poor widow. She gave her all when those who should be giving more were giving left-overs. Our text is a cry against those who parade their religion and make a show of their faith. It is a warning to those who expect to carry weight in the congregation without doing their fair share. It is a judgment upon those of us who are often willing to let the

next person do what we should be doing. It is an indictment against those who would devour the houses of widows and take from those who have nothing to give.

Today is Commitment Sunday. We will not be collecting pledges but a time to pledge in our hearts to support the work of this congregation and the wider church. I wonder if this congregation could take a lesson from Pastor Jacobson, my father-in-law. We might grow spiritually if we gave more. Even if we haven't yet become "cheerful givers," it could be that if we gave more we would be blessed much more. The prophet Malachi records God's Word: "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse...and thus put me to the test says the Lord of Hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing."

We give because we need to give. We have received so much from the Lord. God did not spare His son but gave Him up for us all. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Our sins are forgiven. We are given strength and blessing and God's presence in our lives. So we want to give back. There is joy in giving that comes from knowing that we are doing our part, our faith share and more besides. There is joy in giving—the poor widow knew that when she gave her two small coins to the Lord. Marian Wright Edelman used wise words when she said, "Doing for others is the rent you've got to pay for living on this earth." And DeWitt Wallace who with his wife Lila Atchison Wallace founder of the Reader's Digest magazine, who made one of America's largest fortunes, gave it all away. Bill and Melinda Gates, Warren Buffett have given the bulk of their fortunes to foundations to heal the sick and provide aide to the poor. Many of you have been richly blessed and have been a blessing to this congregation and the wider community. Some of you who have lesser resources are giving sacrificially like the widow in our text. You are an example of sacrificial giving and beloved of God. It is a joy to give. Give and you will receive. Give and you will find joy. Amen.