

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost, November 14, 2021
“Letting God Lead” (Mark 12:28-44)

Everyone swore the woman was crazy. She lived in a nice little house, a Victorian style, two-story cottage. Upstairs was an apartment, and downstairs were four rooms just the right size for a widow like her. It was even in a nice location – just across the street from a little Methodist church. She owned the house outright, yet she said it belonged to Jesus. Therein lies the root of her insanity. Now if that were the whole story, people would have called her spiritual or religious; but they knew the rest of the story, so they said she was crazy.

You see, she and her husband had lived in that house for years. After decades of marriage, he decided to run off with a younger woman. So he abandoned his wife and filed for divorce. In the settlement, she got the house. The courts had declared it to be hers; yet she insisted it was Jesus’ house. But that’s not the whole story. If the story had stopped there, people would have understood.

You see, this ex-husband of hers – the one who had cheated on her and abandoned her – got cancer. He was dying and had no money and no one to care for him. For many of us, this might seem like justice. But here was this woman sitting in her home – or rather, Jesus’ home – with that apartment upstairs. So, what did she do? She took that cheating ex-husband of hers in Jesus’ house, put him in that upstairs apartment, and cared for him until he died. That’s why everyone swore she was crazy.

That’s probably what people thought about the widow from our gospel text this morning. When Jesus came to the temple, he saw all those religious leaders walking around in their long, flowing robes. The way they carried themselves showed that they enjoyed their positions of honor and power. They enjoyed the greetings from the people in the market and invitations to all the best dinners. But Jesus saw their hypocrisy. They devoured widows’ houses for their own personal gain and then made long pretentious prayers to make themselves look righteous. Jesus saw them for what they were.

Then Jesus saw this widow. She didn’t have a long robe. In fact, her clothes were tattered and torn. Like most widows in Bible times, her life was difficult. Being a woman in a male-dominated culture made her a second-class citizen with very few rights. And with no husband to provide and care for her, life was even more challenging. Widows like her lived on the edge of society and often had to rely on the mercy of others. When this unnamed, unimportant widow dropped her two coins – the only two coins she had – into the treasury box, the people must have thought she was insane. To give her last two coins made no sense at all. But Jesus praised her. Amid all the giving that took place that day, amid all the large sums of money deposited by the rich, Jesus was most impressed with her gift, the smallest of the day.

He lifted her as an example for his disciples, praising her for realizing that those two coins were not hers, but God’s. God had given them to her and she could do little with them. They would barely be enough to feed her for a day or two. But maybe the God who rained down bread from heaven could make better use of them. So she offered them.

This is a lesson in true giving, a lesson on how to truly let God lead one's life. This is what it means to have faith in God; to truly surrender it all to God. The Pharisees, on the other hand, had so much and continually made a show of their devotion to God. But in reality, they had given nothing. This widow, however, had given all she had because she trusted God. She was content to let God lead her giving and, ultimately, her life.

What if we would all go around saying that our cars and houses and bank accounts belong to Jesus? It might seem a little strange, yet it is more than correct. We are Christians, after all, and we have supposedly given our lives to Jesus. Therefore, all that we have belongs to him. Now, if we go around making this declaration, people may call us religious or spiritual. They might even applaud us or invite us over to dinner, as they did with the Pharisees. But just *saying* that what we have belongs to Jesus is not enough. God wants more from us.

Let's think about it this way. It's fine to say your car belongs to Jesus. People will respect you for that. But it's an entirely different thing to loan it to your neighbor when his car is broken down – especially if you and your spouse have to share your other car.

It's fine to say that your house belongs to Jesus. People will accept that as a statement of faith and applaud it. But it is another thing to open your home to those in need – even when they are perfect strangers or people who have hurt you in the past.

It's nice to say that all you have belongs to God. And it looks good when you put in the offering plate that extra money you didn't spend last month or give some extra time to serving God. People will say, *Isn't that a faithful person?* But it is quite another thing to give your last two cents to God. For that, you'll be called crazy.

But Jesus calls it true giving. True giving is when, in faith, we sacrifice everything: our cars, our home, our very lives for the will of God. It's not merely *saying* we've giving it all to Jesus; it's actually doing it. That's what this widow did. She had nothing except two coins – and faith. The two coins couldn't support her, but her faith told her that God could. She wasn't trying to buy a favor from God. She was simply placing her trust in the only one she could depend on. She was totally and unequivocally letting God lead.

In contrast, the Pharisees only gave the appearance. They placed bags of spare change in the offering plate, thinking they were doing something good. They thought they really had something, when they really had nothing. And they found condemnation in Jesus' eyes.

The widow, however, is the one who was truly blessed. Because of her poverty, she realized that she had nothing. And because she realized she had nothing, she placed all her hopes – and her very life – in God's hands. After all, he is the only One who can ever really meet our needs.

I realize that a sermon focused on money and giving is not what people sitting in the pew really want to hear. And it's not a subject on which I particularly like to preach. However, Jesus saw it as important for us to hear. Today's story is just one of many in the gospels in which Jesus cautions us of the pitfalls of placing our trust in earthly possessions instead of placing it in God.

And since we'll be looking at our ministry plan in a few minutes, this story couldn't be more apropos. It provides us the opportunity to think about the commitments we make to Christ and his church and to consider our own giving. So, how *do* we approach giving?

Some of us may approach giving in that we plan to give, and will give what we are able. Maybe we're just not sure of what will happen next week, next month, or next year – particularly in our current economic climate. But the example Jesus lifted up to his disciples was of a woman who was unable to give. She didn't know what her future would hold, but she faithfully placed it in God's hands. Making a commitment of regularly giving to Christ and his church is a statement of faith. Realizing that God has provided for us and will continue to provide for us, we faithfully give back to him a portion of his many blessings.

Maybe we have a level of giving that is comfortable for us and we've been giving at that level for a number of years. Perhaps that's what we plan to give moving forward. But what does this say about our faith? If we hold our giving at a certain level, that's a sign that we're not growing in our faith. A heart that is close to God seeks to let God lead. It seeks to give of itself for God and God's people. In addition, when we limit our giving to a certain level year after year, we seem to be saying that God's blessings are limited – that God hasn't blessed us any more this year than he did last year, or the year before. But can we truthfully say that? God's blessings overflow into our lives. We can just look around and we'll easily see. Perhaps counting those blessings will lead us to a deeper level of thankfulness and gratitude.

Or maybe we commit to increase our giving each year. We are aware that God has blessed us even more, and we want to respond to those blessings. Even though that is commendable, we still need to ask ourselves if we are giving out of abundance or need. In other words, are we giving God what is left over, or are we sacrificing something else in order to reach our level of giving? Is God truly leading our lives and our giving?

Each of us, through prayer and reflection, must decide the level of our commitment and giving. And I encourage each of us to give, but not because the church needs money (even though it does have ministry expenses). Rather, we should give for our own good. Giving helps us place our trust and hope in the hands of the Lord instead of earthly riches which have no eternal value. Giving helps us grow in our faith and walk more closely with Christ. Through giving and serving, we experience the joyful life that God intended for us from the beginning.

So, let God lead, my friends. Let him lead your thoughts and actions. Let him lead your decisions, your relationships, and your giving. Let God lead your whole life. No, it's not crazy. It's truly the only sensible thing to do. Amen.