

22 Pentecost 2003
"The Significance of the Gift"
The Rev. Thomas W Simmons IV

It's fun watching children growing up. Recently my son Henry was watching me eat little pretzels and asked me for one. He extended his little hand and said, "ah aph!" That translates roughly, "May I have one of those, please?"

When I gave him the pretzel, though, he didn't eat it. After a moment of thought he offered it back to me with a big smile. I munched it out of his hand, "Yum!" He immediately wanted another one and soon handed it back for me to eat.

That's when it hit me. **What a great picture this is of our relationship with God.** We're as dependent on God as the Nugget Head is on Tait and me. Like little children we receive God's blessings and we have opportunity to offer them back to God.

I can tell you, it's such a fine thing to be in this kind of generous and mutually reciprocating relationship with God. This is echoed in the traditional offertory acclamation: "All things come from you O Lord, and from your own have we given you." Rick Newby cited that in his stewardship letter to you last week.

This theme is illustrated in our Gospel this morning. Jesus and his disciples are out people watching, like you do in the mall or stadium or at school. There are so many interesting characters in the world and there is so much we can learn by just taking time to notice. Sometimes we just need to just de-focus and un-hurry ourselves and take in what's going on around us.

So let's do that. **Let's go people watching with Jesus.** We join up with him in Jerusalem in the Temple. The time of Passover is near so the great crush of Jewish pilgrims is milling about the Temple courts preparing for the big day. Jesus singles out three characters for observation.

First, he points to a scribe. Jesus observes his dress, gestures, the way he prays and expresses himself and treats others. He appears to be a well-respected religious leader and he knows it. He's come to expect a certain level of deference and special favor from those around him. The life of religious leadership has been good to him. "He loves to have the best seats in the synagogue and places of honor at banquets."

This guy's religion appears to be a means to an end. He's there for what he can get out of it: position, prestige, sanctity, a living, whatever. Perhaps at one time he was sincere, but now he's become a religious consumer, taking but not giving back, even to the point of impoverishing widows to live off their generosity. That's why Jesus says he "shall receive the greater condemnation."

We move with Jesus, through the crowds, to the entrance of the Temple. That's where they kept the treasury. You can't miss it when you pass it every time you enter the temple. Its position is a **not-so-subtle reminder** to worshippers of their responsibility to render to God their tithe.

I can almost picture a turnstile! I don't know which is more attention getting: having people pay as they enter or passing around a big brass plate right under your nose during the service.

Anyway, Jesus and the disciples sit down and we join them, people-watching at the treasury. There's a lot of activity and milling around and a lot of interesting behavior to observe as people practice their stewardship. This is where they enact their relationship with God in a very *concrete* way, by offering their *money* as a gift to God. It doesn't get more practical than that.

You see our relationship with God can easily become abstract and theoretical - very "spiritual". **But giving tends to focus the mind and heart** and clarifies one's real commitments. It shows what's really important to a person, where the proverbial rubber hits the proverbial road.

That's what Jesus is looking for at the treasury. He spots very different characters: a lot of rich people and a poor widow. And you know when Jesus starts comparing people like this we're in for a good lesson.

Jesus begins by contrasting **the size of their gifts**. Remember that folks didn't have checks back then where you fill in the amount and drop it in the plate. Money was mass, it was stuff, like gold coins. You could see how much someone was giving by how big and heavy their bag was as they dropped it into the treasury with a grunt and a heave.

That's kind of thing gets attention. I'm sure members of the Stewardship Committee would like to see the modern equivalent here! But Jesus' attention is more focused on an old widow who has just two copper coins in her hand - virtually nothing. No one notices as she drops them in without any fuss.

But Jesus notices and contrasts **the significance of their gifts**. You see in the eyes of God, the widow has put in "more than all those who are contributing." To the treasurer it doesn't look like much, but to God what matters is not the quantity of the offering but manner in which it was given.

For the wealthy - for us - it is relatively easy to cut God into the family budget, letting him have a few percentage points or rounding it off to \$1000 or \$1200. Maybe it cuts into the entertainment budget a little, but that new TV can wait until next year.

The widow on the other hand has given sacrificially. I think TOO sacrificially, actually. Jesus condemns the scribes for devouring widow's houses. She's one of them, whom the scribes induce to give it all to the treasury, to support the self-serving lifestyle of the religious leaders.

Though they are corrupt, she is pure. She's offering everything to God - quite literally. To do so she puts her whole trust in God for provision, protection and guidance in life. She is saying that she loves God more than any other thing. She is willing to "offer her LIFE a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God." She's like the disciples who left everything to follow Jesus.

Why are the poor are so much more generous? It's well documented that the poorer the people in a church, the more they give. And illustrated on a national scale as well. Just this past week statistics of charitable giving were released. Guess which states had the highest percentage of per capita charitable giving. California? New York? Virginia? Nope! It was Mississippi, followed by Arkansas, followed by South Dakota. The three poorest states in the Union. Maybe this kind of generosity has to do with being poor in spirit.

Anyway, the rich folks and the widow illustrate two very different attitudes toward stewardship and living in relationship with God.

To the rich guy, his stuff was his stuff. His question is, "how much will I give to God?" **He's letting God have some**, a few percentage points, maybe even the full 10% required by God for the tithe. But from his perspective, its money he's letting God have, like a tip for services rendered, (and a pretty paltry tip at that, in a world where we give our waitresses 15-20%).

But to the widow, it's all God's stuff. God's stuff is his stuff and he shares it with us for our enjoyment and use, as part of our relationship with God. The question for her is, "how much must I keep for myself?" "All things come from you O Lord and of your own have we given you." It's as simple as Henry offering me back the pretzel I had given him.

So how would you rather live? The widow gave it all back, and Jesus says we can, too. When the offering plates come around you can tip God, letting him have some of your stuff. Or you can put your life in there with our offering, just as if you put that brass plate on the floor and stepped into it, "offering your life a living sacrifice."

Our goal in stewardship at St Peter's is Building Christians for Service in this way. **We want each one of you can grow** to experience this kind of relationship with God and to live it out in lives of greatness. AMEN