

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“An Abundance Attitude”
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Genesis 1:29-31; Mark 12:41-44

There are special moments in every teacher’s life when they see the lightbulb turn on in a student’s mind. All the hard work explaining and demonstrating and running through the concept over and over finally pays off. The student gets it and the teacher swells with joy.

This story in Mark is a joyful moment for our teacher, Jesus. He has just arrived in Jerusalem with everyone else for Passover. As the crowds grow, Jesus finds a spot in the temple to “people watch.” He should see righteous displays of faith from the people of God. This is a festival that attracts all the religious celebrities to one place and all their fans. If you want a good example of how to worship God, this should be the place to take notes.

What Jesus observes is not very encouraging. He sees people taking on far too much work in the temple because they think it will somehow win them friends, or respect, or a place in heaven. He hears loud praying so everyone will know exactly how religious that person is. He sees people dressed in their glitziest robes, passive-aggressively positioning for the best seat in the courtyard. He hears offerings being made one coin at a time, so that the clinking of their donation fills every ear. Clink, clink, clink, clink, clink, clink, clink. Jesus gets frustrated with the missteps of God’s people. How are they still not getting this?! Abraham explained it, Moses explained it, the prophets explained all of this. Why are they still treating God in this way? He hears it again, clink, clink... then nothing. Jesus looks up to see why this person has delayed putting in the rest of their coins and sees a widow walking away from the offering jar. A smile spreads across the teacher's face. She gets it.

She gets it! This woman understands what an offering is and how to give. Jesus quickly gathers the disciples and points her out. “This woman has given the biggest offering of anyone here,” he tells them. We easily understand that Jesus does not care about the amount of an offering, but we struggle with what he does care about. Many interpret this scripture to mean we should all give until it hurts. Jesus says these others will not even miss the money they have given, but she will, so we think he is saying we should all give until we would miss the money we give. However, I think Jesus is holding this widow up as an example for a different reason. We don’t know anything about this particular widow. We only know from the context that she is probably very poor, as most widows were. We know widows had a low standing in the community and had no power to speak up for change. Widows were dependent on the kindness and generosity of others to survive. But that doesn’t mean they were worthless. Widows were probably reliable childcare, surely some of them made the best soup in town, and maybe others were great storytellers. In the best-case scenario, widows were still a part of the community, maybe not valued like Jesus would have liked, but they were still included. This widow was included in the Passover events. She was allowed to come into the temple to participate in the festivities, so she was still an active member of the community.

Jesus has watched the life of this community all day. Jesus isn’t against what the temple stands for in theory. Jesus likes that this is a place for people to gather, he loves that they feel close to God here. The temple is a place where people come to learn. Even Jesus, as a child, learned in the courtyard and is now teaching there. If he hated the temple he would not go there to participate in the life of this place. Jesus likes the general ministry of the temple and the community it supports. So, let’s assume this community was doing its best to support the widows in their

midst because they knew these women were valuable members, and God wanted them to care for the widows. If that was the case the temple probably took up an offering for a widow's ministry. A ministry this widow would have been a benefactor of. Then she finds herself with two extra coins at festival time. She could go and buy herself a celebratory pomegranate. Yet, she gets it. She gets that she has received blessings from this community and heads to the temple to drop her two coins in the jar.

When I first started working for a church, I had this awkward realization. If I give my tithe but then get a salary from which the tithe comes from, am I giving at all? It was this weird "catch 22" dilemma I still wrestle with from time to time. I think this widow at some point wrestled with the same thing. If I give these two coins today but then get a full meal tomorrow, am I even giving anything? In a roundabout way am I just giving to myself? Yes... and that's what she understands. Giving to a community that supports you and benefits you is just giving to yourself. This is a good investment strategy too. Buying stock in products you need and purchase is a good idea. Giving to a ministry that offers something for you ensures the community will still be able to do the ministry it is doing, and you will continue being supported. Jesus holds this widow up as an example because she understands this concept. Not because she gave until it hurts, she donated to what helped heal her.

When we get to stewardship season, church leadership starts to trip over themselves to try and teach this idea in a new way. We think somehow stewardship is such a foreign concept that members just don't get it. But we aren't doing anything in the church that isn't happening in every store in the world. Money is exchanged for a need or a want. The concept is easy, the problem is when we give to the church that feeling of mutuality gets blurred. There isn't an immediate exchange of goods or services. Here in our church, we can take for granted that money comes in and great ministries thrive. The link between the two gets lost.

For the widow, it was very tangible. Without the temple's widow ministry, she would be hungry and so she feels a strong pull to give what she can to keep the temple open and working. She depends on it being funded. That isn't something just the widow or the needy can feel. If we take a moment to reach out for that link and find it for ourselves, find what we depend on here in this community, we realize we are all beneficiaries of the ministry of this church. Some of us come here to learn, from staff who spend their working hours planning the education. Some of us receive a "Basket of Love" at Thanksgiving and Christmas. Some of us have been visited by a Pastor or a Deacon, that without a paid church phone bill would not have happened. Some of us have met lifelong friends here, or have children who have supportive, loving friends here because this building is a safe and clean place to gather. We are all beneficiaries of the ministry of our pledges, tithes, and offerings. Giving to this church is giving to ourselves.

Let me take a quick, side tangent to explain three words. Tithes, offerings, and pledges. Tithes - we usually have some sense of its meaning. A tithe is 10% of a person's income. That percentage was established by a few Biblical texts that suggest 10% is a respectable amount to give to ministries doing God's work in the world. There are hundreds of sermons written about the tithing texts. This is not a sermon about those verses. All I want you to have in mind is 10% is a tithe. An offering, then, is anything given above 10%. It is above and beyond what is sufficient. Offerings were and are taken for special causes or needs in the community. We recently took an offering for Hurricane relief.

That leaves pledges. Pledges started when churches realized they needed to have a clue about what was going to be donated in a year to set a budget. Pledges are the commitments we are willing to make, and the expectations we place on ourselves for the coming year. We are lucky that we operate in a pledge structure. For the widow, she had to have money at the ready when the jar ran out. We get a little more wiggle room on the timing. So, knowing about

tithes and offerings, we make a pledge. It is the declaration of the commitment we feel we can uphold over the next year to support the ministry of the community we value. And just like Jesus gathered the disciples to learn from the widow's offering we are being asked to look at her example today too. Because she gets it.

When Jesus saw that woman give her two coins, he must have swelled with joy seeing someone get it and live it out. I felt the same way when I heard about Jack. Jack gets it too. Jack is five years old, and he goes to our Hand-in-Hand day school. Another ministry we can take for granted, thanks to your pledges, tithes, and offerings. Jack comes here to learn and to play with his friends. Every day after school he doesn't head straight to the parking lot, he actually comes into the sanctuary to say hello to God. If you haven't heard your voice echo in this room when it's empty, I highly encourage you to try it someday. After Jack has met with God he walks into our administrator, Jan's office, and gets a piece of candy from her candy bowl. With sweet in hand, or more likely in belly, Jack heads to the parking lot to go home. Someone in Jack's family has realized that it takes some effort to keep the candy bowl full. Since it is one of Jack's favorite things about this place, they have taught Jack that he should support the candy bowl stash. Every so often Jack brings a bag of candy for Jan. This is not an easy thing for Jack to do. Holding that big bag of candy, even a five-year-old can work out, "If I keep this bag, I get it all. If I give this bag, I have to share."

The link between giving and receiving in the church gets blurred because one donation gets spread between so many different beneficiaries. It's like ordering fries for the whole table. Everyone benefits, but the temptation to feel like we have lost something because we didn't get to eat every last fry sometimes sneaks up on us, and we second guess if we want to order fries next time.

Taking the time now to think about what we love about this community and making a pledge to keep that ministry thriving helps us defeat that temptation. We ask ourselves now, how much do I value the ministry of this place? Do I want to be the kind of person who buys fries for the whole table, who gives to the ministries I value? Just like Jack must ask himself. Do I love getting candy enough to hand over the excess of candy I have this month? Hopefully, the answer is yes, and we can all benefit from the gifts we all give.

I heard someone in a podcast this month say, "A sermon is not the words a preacher prepares over the week, it is the moving of the Holy Spirit in each person's heart and mind." I want us now to sit and listen to the sermon the Holy Spirit is preaching to each of us individually.

May we be as brave as that widow to live out what the Spirit has taught us today.