

Going All In
February 1, 2015
Mark 12:41-44

This morning our Scripture reading comes from the twelfth chapter of Mark's Gospel. It is the story of the generous widow.

He (Jesus) sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.

Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, 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."

May God bless the reading and hearing of these words.

Let us pray . . . Still Speaking God, help us to hear your word for us this day. Take and use the words that Terri, Deanna, Muriel, Alan and I will speak to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Pastor Scott Hauser recently shared a list of things that many American Christians often love more than God. His list includes items many may dismiss, but perhaps should not: football, beauty, and technology. It also contains items that some may be more willing to admit often become like gods – at least for a season: the American way, attention, and safety. Whether or not your complete list would look similar to Hauser's, I think you will agree with his assertion that the number one American idol – the thing we most often love more than God – is money.¹

Given our cultural tendency to love money and even to obsess about it, we need to be reminded that this is not God's plan. We talked last week about stewardship as a whole life experience. Everything that we have and everything that we are is God's; we are entrusted to care for it all as stewards or managers.

¹ Scott Hauser. "American Idols: The Top 10 Things That We Love More Than God." <<http://www.pres-outlook.com/insights-opinions/outpost-blog/19202-american-idolsthe-top-10-things-that-we-love-more-than-god-.html>>

While we have divided our stewardship campaign into two separate weeks, it is important to see that the components are designed to work together rather than in competition or isolation. We demonstrate the centrality of the way of Jesus by how we live our lives each day.

A few years ago the United Church of Christ published a stewardship booklet as a part of the Congregational Vitality Initiative. It is co-authored by Martin Copenhaver and Lillian Daniel – two UCC pastors you may know.

This booklet features several multiple choice questions. I will share one with you. As I do, be sure to choose an answer.

When the preacher begins a sermon on stewardship, your first thought is:

- a. "Did I leave the oven on?"
- b. "I'm so glad my shallow, materialistic neighbor is here to hear this."
- c. "I come here for hope and inspiration, not to have some spoiled brat make me feel guilty for what I have," or
- d. "Does God really care about money? I'll listen just in case the Spirit has a word for me."²

I hope we all know the right answer is D. To help us really hear the word God has for each of us today, four members of our community of faith have agreed to share reflections about their experiences with giving of their financial treasure. As you listen to their stories, I encourage you to consider your own.

(Terri Crawford, Deanna Fisher, Alana & Muriel Rogers Testimonials)

Thank you Terri, Deanna, Alan and Muriel. Your stories remind that our financial stewardship is a spiritual matter not simply an economic decision. They also push me to think about my own giving, as I seek to finalize my pledge.

With that in mind, I think it is about time we return to the little stewardship booklet I mentioned earlier so that I can ask a second quiz question. This one allows you to play the role of subject matter expert.

² Lillian Daniel and Martin B. Copenhaver. "Are You Ready to Talk About Money in Your Church?" (2008)

A new church member wants to know *how much* he or she should give to the church. You say:

- a. "That's a very important decision. So important that I could not possibly advise you on it."
- b. "Pick a number—any number."
- c. "What I do is take a percentage of my income. It's a way of sharing what I have," or
- d. You pretend that your hearing aid isn't working and you don't know what the person is saying. Or, if you don't need hearing aids, you pretend you hear someone calling for help.

Whether or not you would like to select another answer or perhaps avoid answering at all, I think that all gathered here know the best advice to give is C. When it comes to giving of our finances, offering a percentage back to God is a best practice.

The average American now gives 3% of income to charity.³ Many here were taught years ago to strive to tithe or give 10% to their church.

I can't tell you what the right percentage is for you for the year ahead. Given our emphasis on extravagant generosity, I encourage you to step out in faith by stepping up your giving.

The woman in this morning's Scripture reading is a powerful example. One contemporary paraphrase explains her giving in this way: "All the others gave what they'll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford - she gave her all."⁴

I invite you to follow the example of the widow – to go all in.

Amen.

³ Jacob Axelrad. "US poor and middle class give more to charity, but wealthy pull back."

<<http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/USA-Update/2014/1006/US-poor-and-middle-class-give-more-to-charity-but-wealthy-pull-back>>

⁴ Mark 12:44, The Message.