

All In  
January 19, 2014  
Mark 12:41-44

This morning our Scripture reading comes from the 12<sup>th</sup> 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 Steve, Jean and I will speak to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Presbyterian minister 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.

---

<sup>1</sup> 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. Our intentional generosity of our time, talent and treasure is far more powerful than any words we might speak.

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 names you may know. Martin has been a pastor in a congregational context for several decades, has written five books, and later this year will become the President of a seminary.<sup>2</sup> Lillian continues to serve in pastoral ministry in the congregational context, has written three books, and is a popular speaker.<sup>3</sup>

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."<sup>4</sup>

I hope we all know the right answer is D. To help us really hear what God has for us this day, two members of our congregation 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.

(Steve Tobey's testimonial)

(Jean O'Neil's testimonial)

---

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Moujaes. "UCC Pastor, Preacher Martin Copenhaver Next Andover Newton President." <<http://www.ucc.org/news/copenhaver-andover-newton-president-11212013.html>>

<sup>3</sup> Lillian Daniel: Bio. <<http://www.lilliandaniel.com/Bio.html>>

<sup>4</sup> Lillian Daniel and Martin B. Copenhaver. "Are You Ready to Talk About Money in Your Church?" (2008)

Thank you Steve. Thank you Jean. I not only learned about your experiences, but also found myself reminded of so many others who have taught me so much about how giving changes the giver. I am also reminded that our financial stewardship is more of a spiritual matter than an economic matter.

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.

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 can be viewed as a best practice.

Many here were introduced to the word "tithe" decades ago. It simply means giving 10%.

Of course, times have changed. Do people really still tithe? They certainly do. The latest State of the Plate survey included over 4,000 tithers.

You might be interested to know that nearly 3 out of every 4 (73%) tithers give more than 10% and almost 10% (9%) of these tithers give over 20%. While most (63%) started tithing at a relatively young age, today is as good a day as any to start this spiritual discipline.<sup>5</sup>

As I studied this morning's Scripture, I was struck again and again by the woman's generous act. One contemporary paraphrase puts it this

---

<sup>5</sup> Greg Smith. "Tithers." <<http://sowhatfaith.com/2013/05/17/tithers/>>

way: "All the others gave what they'll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford - she gave her all."<sup>6</sup>

This morning as we consider the future of United Church, we look ahead a few moments to our annual meeting, a few months to the arrival of a new pastor, and a few years to ponder the possibilities of what we will accomplish together as we are led by the Spirit.

I invite you to make your contribution that will help make this possible. I invite you to do so not because you must, but because you may. I invite you to follow the example of the widow – to go all in.

I also want to remind you that going "all in" will mean different things for different people.

Some in our midst have never pledged or have not pledged in many years. For you going "all in" may mean completing a pledge card and fulfilling whatever amount you write on it.

A good number here have pledged faithfully each and every year for many years. For you going "all in" may mean continuing your regular practice, and doing so with genuine joy.

Many gather here and participate in this church on seasonal basis. For you going "all in" may reflect your commitment to this community in addition to your support of another.

Some here feel challenged to tithe even though you have not done so in recent years or perhaps ever. Others here feel led to grow in their generosity by increasing the dollar amount or percentage pledged. For both groups, going "all in" may mean doing so today or may mean taking a step in that direction.

You have heard a few testimonials. You have answered a few multiple choice questions. Now it is time to complete your pledge cards. As you complete your pledge card or perhaps modify the one you brought with you, I will close with' a bit of my own story.

I am a rare bird: I am someone who is here seasonally, but who isn't a snowbird.

---

<sup>6</sup> Mark 12:44, The Message.

When my wife and I place our pledge in the offering plate in a few moments, we do so knowing that we will be here for just six months this year. We also recognize that the ministry of this congregation continues for the full year.

We are a part of another church, and have made our annual pledge there for the last several years. Once again this year, we have committed to do so.

How will we support the ministry and mission of United Church? We will pledge to give a tithe and then some on all income I receive for my ministry here. We will use that same percentage as our guide for giving from any other new income sources we may experience. For us, that is what it means to go “all in.”

In a few minutes our collection plates will fill with pledge cards. I invite you to join the poor widow, countless saints who have gone before, and many gathered here this day in our sacred space by going “all in” with your pledge.

Amen.