

Not the Coins, But the Heart
Luke 21:1-6

The people couldn't help but think Jesus was wrong. Those rich people, whom everyone envied and admired, who put in their offerings gave much more than the poor widow. Everyone knows that. Especially when you consider that most likely these rich folk did indeed tithe. Their money was not to be sneezed at. And so, those in the crowd correct Jesus. They tell him to look at the splendor of the temple.

But he says, look at that poor widow, who put in two copper coins. She gave more than anyone. Even in her poverty, she has put in all she had to live on. They said, Look at the beautiful temple, in which she and everyone else worships. Look at those beautiful stones, look at those wondrous gifts dedicated to God. Her copper coins didn't buy that.

And, they are correct. As everyone looked at the generous rich people placing their offering in the Temple, everyone rejoiced: now there would be enough money to fix the leak in the temple roof, pay the scribe to make copies for the Sabbath service, and yes, even give some to help the poor. Those two copper coins... they are not really so very much.

Her two copper coins would not fix the roof, would not pay the mortgage, would not feed the poor. To have a splendid temple you need the rich. But Jesus said, The temple is beautiful and splendid indeed, the Temple where he was dedicated at 8 days old. Perhaps Jesus himself

recalled the dazzle and the splendor when his parents brought him at 12 to the Temple and learned at the feet of the priests in these splendid surroundings. Yes, look at the beautiful stones, the other rich gifts. They are indeed wonderful to behold. But the day will come when they are no more.

You are right. Two copper coins will not buy a stained glass window or a tapestry or a scroll. To build a temple, you need generous gifts from wealthy people. But to build the Kingdom of God, you need the heart of the widow. And this is where Jesus is correct, that she gave so much more than anyone else.

For the Kingdom is ultimately not about money. It is about the heart. I suppose it is possible to give without loving; perhaps this is what some of the rich people were doing; but it is not possible to love without giving. And here is the heart of the widow.

She loved. Loved God. Appreciated all the blessings with which she had been blessed. To some, her blessings seemed meager, but her life felt abundant to her. Now, we do not know any details about this widow, but if she were like most, she depended upon alms from the temple; it was the social security system of her day. And look what she does: whatever she has received, she wants to share with others. No her two copper coins could not build a temple; but her heart builds the Kingdom of God.

Now, shifting gears, how do we apply this story to our day, to our church? First, Jesus is not

telling us that there is a special virtue in being poor nor vice in being rich. He is not saying she is special because she is a woman or because she is a widow. What he is saying is this: the strength of the church cannot be measured ultimately by dollars and cents; it is measured in love, in generosity, in commitment.

Now you know and I know at some level there is a practical, financial part to being a church. We both know that there is a budget of about \$650,000 that we will be challenged to meet next year. And our current level of giving isn't quite there to meet the budget. We all know that I, as your pastor, want us to meet the budget. Meeting the budget is a sign that our church really is involved in vital ministry, as our giving helps people literally around the world.

But may our concept of stewardship never revolve around a budget. All a budget is, is a document that shows the bare minimum of what it will cost for us to be in ministry and mission that way that God has called us to be in ministry and mission. A church that meets its budget easily should not congratulate itself, for it shows we have not fully embraced all the possibilities that God sets out before us. It is God who defines the ministry and mission of a church, not the budget.

Yes the church needs your offerings, but more importantly, the Kingdom needs your commitment. The most pressing need at Ann Street is not financial but spiritual. And you know what? It is the most pressing need of my life and your life as well.

Many of our congregation are like that widow. Their income is not great in relation to our obligations. They sputter from paycheck to paycheck and college tuition and electric bills and taxes and taxes and clothes and kids and cars eat it all up. We want to give to the church, but there is none left over. But she gave what she could.

Others in our congregation are more financially well-off. But even here, it is easy to let our own stuff and dreams and desires get in the way of what God is calling us to do.

And when we fall into the trap of only giving leftovers, our giving on behalf of God leaves us feeling guilty and unfulfilled. If God gets only the leftovers of our time, our energy, our love, our talent, then our spirits feel parched and withered.

But you know what? I believe the heart of that widow also beats within all of us. It's just that some of us have not yet set it free. But when we do, then we will truly find that life of abundance and peace and happiness which glowed so brightly in that widow that Jesus noticed her above all the rest.

How do we begin this journey? How do we set our hearts free?

First, when you wake up every day, realize how much God loves you. May the cross never be some datum of history, but may it be for us every day the mark of Christ's love for us. God so loved you that he gave his only begotten son. Don't forget that. In the world we are sometimes

overlooked, sometimes frustrated and defeated; but God never does that. I hope that our church will always reflect God's accepting, redeeming love. That all of us feel welcome when we come together as a church.

And secondly, let us never forget that we are part of the greatest calling ever known: the calling to let the world experience the love of Jesus Christ. And that comes not ultimately not just from our preaching, not just from our programs, but from your heart and my heart. No, the copper coins could not build a temple, but the heart which gave them touched the heart of Christ himself.

Who knows what difference we might make when we truly give our hearts into God's service? No one would ever have called that widow famous or powerful; and I doubt she ever knew her two copper coins ever made a difference at all. But they did, to Jesus, to God, and even to us, for they inspire us and challenge us to this very day. We live in a time when we are attracted to celebrities, even Christian celebrities, such as Billy Graham or Mother Teresa. But Jesus noticed those whom others did not notice. Others such as this widow with her copper coins, not clutched but given, others such as you and me.

And, yes, if God loves us and if God calls us and if we love God, then we wrestle these next few weeks with how our faith, our discipleship is to be expressed in our financial giving. Now, we all know the tithe, which is ten percent of our income, is set as the Biblical ideal of giving. Not that there's anything wrong with going beyond that. Jesus was never one to set arbitrary

boundaries.

Of course, if you do not give ten percent, it does not mean God loves you less; it just means he has one less option to accomplish his will. Let's be honest. Most people in most churches do not tithe. But, you see, tithing is as much an attitude as it is a monetary sum.

Even if you cannot reach that biblical standard, I want to encourage you to develop a tithing attitude: A tithing attitude is this: First, to live in relationship to God, to notice His blessings and accept his challenges. Secondly, truly to seek God's will as to what you should give financially to his work. Thirdly, to consider growing in giving, as a response. If we think in terms of percentages, if you give, say 2% to the work of God, why not consider going to 2.5 or even 3? And see how that goes.

Finally, a tithing attitude never just gives God just the leftovers. Maybe make your offering the first check you write every week, the first item in your budget for the coming year. It won't really make a financial difference to you one way or another, but it will make a spiritual difference. Because there is no better feeling than knowing we are participating in the greatest work ever known, which is the sharing of God's love with the world.

It happened to be a poor widow with two copper coins. But it could have been anyone. A rich man with thousands, or a child or even someone else. What mattered was not her status in life; what mattered was not the amount, what mattered was her heart, a heart which was set on God,

a heart which led her to give.

What excites me most about being your pastor is to know that each of you has the same kind of heart. You love God. You want to grow in faith and obedience to God. You want to serve God. You have hearts that yearn to give. A heart sort of like that widow, whose faith was so great that it was expressed in her giving.

And some said, two copper coins? They won't buy much. But Jesus knew her heart would grow a Kingdom. Let's promise God to be kingdom-growers. Sure, our money will help. But God really needs your heart and my heart; for once he captures your heart and my heart, the money, and the mission, and the ministry will follow. Because you cannot love without giving.