

“Giving Our All”

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
November 12, 2017

Old Testament lesson: Ecclesiastes 5:10 and Proverbs 22:1

New Testament lesson: Luke 21:1-4

Have you ever heard of a lucky penny? “See a penny, pick it up, and all day long you’ll have good luck.” How many of you bother to pick up a penny from the sidewalk? Some do; some don’t. For those who always stop to pick up a penny, I wonder if it’s because it’s good luck, or is it because a penny has value. I have to admit, I tend to think of pennies as more of a nuisance than a value. That’s why I have a whole bag of them at home – I won’t throw them out, but I’m not going to carry them around either.

If you have your own stash of pennies collecting dust at home, it might be worth sorting through them. Not only are pennies dated 1909 to 1982 worth about double their face value in copper, there are a couple of 1982 pennies that are worth quite a bit more. There’s the 1982 Small Date penny worth about 50 cents – I think I found one of those – and there’s the 1982-D Small Date penny worth about \$19,000. You’ll probably never find one of those – they’re very, very rare.

So what’s a penny worth? It depends. If you started to get really excited about those valuable pennies, then a penny could change your life. While none of us is likely to find a penny worth \$19,000, each of us can experience a powerful, life changing shift in our relationship to God by taking a good look at our relationship to money.

Jesus shows us this in today’s New Testament lesson where it says:

“He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.” Jesus is drawing a powerful comparison between those who have a healthy relationship with money and those who don’t.

For instance, just one passage earlier, Jesus denounces the scribes because they like to walk around in long robes and be greeted with respect, and yet, says Jesus, “They devour widows’ houses.” In other words, they don’t use what they have for God’s purpose – taking care of the poor. Instead, they use their wealth to put themselves ahead of others. The message is clear. When we look at our time and money and talents as a way of helping others, we and others are blessed.

When we're always worried about not having enough to give, that's a spiritual deficiency, not financial. Our worth as a human being is not based on what we have, but rather what we give, or more precisely, how we give.

Having a lot of money doesn't make you a better person, and having little money doesn't mean you're not worth more than anything in the world. The widow Jesus pointed to was worth more than anything or anyone else, in God's eyes. Meanwhile, rich people – like the scribes who wore great looking clothes and strutted around with their heads held high – they don't. This isn't because of how much money they give or didn't give to the church. They fall short because of how they give, not what they gave.

Jesus wants to make it absolutely clear that what you give is a measure of your spiritual fitness, regardless of how much money you have or don't have. For instance, we don't really even know how much the rich people gave. It says only that they put their gifts into the temple treasury. We don't know if these were big gifts – whether we're talking about a good bit of money here, or just pennies compared to all their wealth. But we do know that in Jesus' eyes, they came up short. They gave out of their abundance – they gave what was comfortable for them, what they could live with and feel good about without really making any sacrifice, without really stretching.

Compare this to the poor widow. All she has are two small copper coins. She knows what it is to be poor, and all she wants in life is to give of herself to the Lord. In her poverty, this widow has come to know the value of putting her trust in God, over and above money. Do you? Do you trust in God over and above money? That's a question we all face every day. Times are hard, for everyone. Everyone has an opportunity to help those less fortunate and to do the work of the Lord, whether that's through our time or talents or money.

Regardless of whether you are wealthy, doing OK, or struggling financially, everyone is called to give sacrificially that we might grow spiritually – to stretch ourselves in our financial giving so that the grip money has on our you and me might be lessened, and the loving embrace of God might be felt all the more, both for us and for those in need.

In our giving, we come face to face with our true value – how much we value ourselves over others and how much we value God over money. It's like the old story about a farmer pledging his faith to the Lord: "If I had a million dollars, Lord, I'd give it to you," he said. "If I had a thousand acres, I'd turn them over to you, Lord." Surprised, the man heard a voice from Heaven saying, "Well, how about a pig?" "Now, take it easy there, Lord; you know I have a pig."

Next Sunday is Pledge Sunday, when we, as members and friends of First Church, declare our financial gifts to the Lord by placing our pledge cards on the Lord's Table to be set aside for God's use.

There's a reason only you and God know what's written on your pledge card. God is the judge, and no one else. God knows whether you give out of abundance – keeping plenty back for yourself – or give sacrificially, with faith that God will bless others, AND you, through what you give.

We are blessed when our love of humankind, the church, and God is greater than our love of money, our fear of scarcity, our envy of others. One of the best ways of getting beyond all this is to really stretch yourself in your giving.

Try it. When filling out your pledge card this year, put down a figure you can be comfortable with. Then erase that number and put down something more – 10 percent, 20 percent, 30 percent more. See how that feels to you. Are you scared? What are you afraid of? Who or what do you trust most in life?

This isn't about giving to the church. It's about giving to God. It's about tearing ourselves away from the love of money and the fear of scarcity and making a concrete, real-life, sacrificial gesture that will deepen your faith and free your soul.

Each one of us has an opportunity to stretch ourselves spiritually next week. And I am confident that giving 10 percent, 20 percent or even 30 percent more – for those who can give – is not going to be a huge financial detriment. Rather, it will be a major spiritual step forward, a freeing, soulful act of trust and faith and love, an act of faith that will bless not only the lives of others, but your life, as well. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

O Lord of Life, you have bestowed upon us the grace and the power to live risen lives, and so we praise you with all our heart and soul.

Fill our hearts with the assurance of eternal life. Make us confident that whether we live or whether we die, we are yours and yours alone.

We pray for Sam Bridges, for Jennifer and Brian and all the family. Give them the peace of your comforting presence, and for Sam, the physical healing of your Spirit of restoration and wholeness.

We ask this too for Leslie Bush, Linda Stewart, Bev Kuzniakowski, Alan Walker, Fred Royal, and all those we keep in prayer.

We thank you, Lord, for the brave souls who have fought, and continue to fight, so courageously for our nation. We ask for your covering and blessing over them and their families.

And we thank you for the freedom you have given to us, and for the price that was paid by Christ so that we could live free. We remember today the cost of it all. The great sacrifice for freedom.

Help us to walk the way of the Servant of God, who came not to be ministered to but to minister unto others, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**