

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk**  
(Delivered on Sunday, November 8, 2015)

**Text: Mark 12:38-44 (NRSV)**

As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

He 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."

**Reflections by Pastor Donald: "All of Me, Why Not Give All of Me? "**

In considering today's scripture and the age old story of the widow and her two mites, it is tempting to preach the story as I have heard it interpreted many times in my life. That is, as a tale of self-sacrifice and a not-so-subtle tug at our purse strings as we're admonished to give more and more and more of our material wealth to the church and to God's mission here on earth.

And, indeed, one has to wonder why the lectionary just happens to emphasize this particular scripture for a Sunday when many if not most churches are celebrating their Stewardship Sundays. A little guilt goes a long way in the church, you know.

But I have come to believe in my own life and in the life of this church as I hear God still speaking to us, that the story before us today is about more than just the sharing of our material gifts and that oftentimes nagging worry of whether we've given "enough."

In my explorations this week, I found many commentators and ruminators having a very different take on this story – especially as they looked at it in its historical context.

We've talked often about the lowly role of women in antiquity and we don't have to look too far to see how this attitude towards women is still asserting itself today whether in places like Saudi Arabia where women are restricted from driving or opening a bank account by themselves or even in the disparity of income between the sexes in our own society here in "modern" America.

As we learned in our LEAP of Faith study this week, the word used for "widow" in the Hebrew Scriptures means "silenced one" or "one who has no voice."

"In ancient society," our Seasons of the Spirit curriculum told us, "a woman usually lived under the authority of a male – her father, her husband, her son, or her brother, [and] was very vulnerable to exploitation and injustice if her husband died and there was no son or brother or father to take care of her. Women in first-century Palestinian society depended upon their husbands, then their sons, for their livelihood, identity, and social position. Often the loss of one's husband was viewed as an omen of

an ill fate that somehow was attached to the woman. She became a shunned woman. Widows, [then], were without power in society, without rights or a voice."

Seeing the woman in today's story in this light, opens our eyes to the fullness of the story in which Jesus calls attention to her and to her offering, not so much praising her for what she gave but noting HOW she was giving – putting in her last two coins – all she had in the world; giving everything she had to live on.

“That should be a moment for pause,” Karoline Lewis wrote in her article “Whole Life Living” this week. “None of us can give that to the church, or to anyone or anything, for that matter. So we cannot reduce her donation to a percentage or a portion. We cannot rationalize her offering for the sake of dedication to some calculated stewardship campaign. She gave her whole life to God.”

And here's where I think Jesus is directing our thoughts and our actions. In all our lives, even when it comes to our very survival and the last that we have to live on, do we give our whole lives to God in faith or do we hold back in fear, wondering if there will be enough or if God truly IS enough and can be relied upon?

It's not an easy question and certainly not one that I could boldly say, “oh yes, I can give everything to God at every moment of my life and know I'm going to be okay.”

I'd LIKE to say that. I've tried to say that. But do I really live it out in my life?

How well I remember what we old actors like to call our “salad” days when there was hardly enough money to even put salad on the table. Considering what I could possibly put in the offering plate in those days was accompanied by much hand wringing and guilty glances as the plate was passed and I either didn't put anything in it or tried to disguise the paltry piece I was placing underneath somebody else's bigger gift.

But God was speaking to my heart in those days as now and encouraging me each time to step out a little further in faith, to understand the power in giving out of the little I had and to realize that by doing so, I was increasing my reliance on God and understanding more and more what it meant to give all of who I was to God.

“God knows nothing else than to give God's whole life,” Professor Lewis writes. “God has shown that time and time again to God's people in the Hebrew Scriptures and we should expect no different now. This is the essence of God -- to give God's whole self. And here, now, in this unnamed widow, God is doing it again...She embodies Jesus' own ministry. She acts out Jesus' own call. She believes that what she does will manifest itself in something beyond herself.”

This isn't just about giving what you have to the church or to whatever charity you might feel called to support, it's about why you give and how you give and what you give from. Do you give of all you are and of all you are called to be? Do we give out of guilt or do we give out of hope and the assurance of things to come? Do we give of our whole selves or only partly?

“God cares, and God invites us to care, too,” Dr. David Lose wrote in his article on this passage this week called, “Surprisingly Good News.” “God believes, in other words, that we have something to contribute, that we can make a difference, that our words and actions can help bring more fully to fruition the kingdom God's own Son proclaimed and embodied. And that even when we fall short, yet the God who raised Jesus from the dead will bring all things in time to a good end.”

There's another aspect to this story as well as we consider who and what Jesus is calling out before he notices the widow and her gift. Those religious pomposities who parade about looking for respect and places of honor while they denigrate the powerless and pray not so much to God as to themselves.

We still see it today. Just turn the channel a few times and you can catch somebody with one hand reaching out as the other reaches up, siphoning off money from the most vulnerable while padding their pockets and building palaces to themselves.

But don't stop there. Let us look into our own hearts and see where our own egos work to keep us shining and untouchable while we ignore the needs around us and forget that others are suffering and defenseless.

"God is inviting us to look around and see each other, those in our community we know and those we don't," Dr. Lose writes. "And I mean really see each other – the pain of those who are discriminated against because of their ethnicity, the desolation of those who cannot find work and have been abandoned to fend for themselves, the despair of those who have given up on finding work and have lost hope, the anguish of those who have been exploited by sex traffickers. God is inviting us to see them, to care for them, and to advocate for a system that does not leave anyone behind."

This is the call of Christ to give all of who we are to God's kin-dom. Recognize those in need right around you, He says. Pay attention to where the needs are and respond. Work for justice and pray for those who, though they have so little to give, find a way to give all that they are.

I'd like to leave you this morning with a first-person account of what giving means to them. This is a short essay from the second volume of a series called "This I Believe." Some of you may recognize that title from its eponymous National Public Radio broadcast wherein people from all walks of life were encouraged to share brief essays about the core values that guide their daily lives.

This essay is called, "All the Joy the World Contains" and is by Jimmie Dale Gilmore, a renowned country singer who lives in Austin, Texas.

*(Due to copyright restrictions, I am unable to include the essay in this transcript, but would encourage you to find it in the book, "This I Believe II" edited by Jay Allison and Dan Gediman.)*