

We GIVE Thanks

The image won't go away. It's stayed with me most of my life, all of my ministry.

The image of the widow putting her two copper coins in the temple treasury.

It has always been the ideal against which I've measured the quality of my own faith walk. Such trust in God to provide.

There is a bit of a paradox in this passage, however. On the one hand Jesus holds up the widow with her offering to the Temple treasury as a very good thing.

On the other hand he says the brick and mortar of Temple means nothing.

But the widow means everything. She has been, as I suspect Jesus intended she would be, a model of faithfulness, of trust, of confidence in God's goodness. I say it frequently - God is God, All the Time. But she, that widow lady, lived out her faith - not in words but in deed. She gave thanks to God. And isn't that the heart of faith for us all? The thanks we give to God?

Please pray with me.

Lord of life, giver of every good and perfect gift. Grant us now in this hour that the words of my mouth, and the thoughts of these your faithful and loving people, will be acceptable in your sight, and your good word to us this day in Christ. Amen.

The image won't go away. The widow lady. And other widow ladies and people of faith over the course of my ministry. And the thanks they gave to God.

Maude Philips was her name. I never knew her. Just a quiet retired school teacher people said. But her faith and her thanks giving to God fashioned a new form of ministry for the Church I served.

She left a gift to the church in her estate that helped her church pay off a new building project, and more. Her gift left a fund that 40 years later supports mission work in that Church's community, and far beyond, and helps send needful young people to college. She gave her thanks to God for all God's gifts to her, and her gift keeps on giving and giving.

Or Roxy Hankins. Crippled widow. But a wonderful cook who gave her thanks to God with baked goods for poor preachers who came to call, and for every Bazaar and Bake Sale. Roxy Hankins was the Agnes Peterman of my first Church.

Or Perkins, I think that was her name. A widow, too, who knew how to sew and taught a class in sewing for young Mexican girls in Chicago - who could hardly sew or speak English when they started, but grew to learn the language under Miss Perkins' watch, and more, came to know the language of God's love through her.

Or Jean McCutcheon of this church family. Retired nurse. Church office volunteer. Who died 12 years ago this year, and left a major gift to this Church, more than \$250,000, which was presented to the Church on Thanksgiving Day. And her gift helped us retire a debt, and build a church in Mexico, and set up a fund that continues to contribute dollars each year to the mission work she dearly loved and cared deeply about. Widow's, and Widow-like offerings... all.

Two coins.... Sometimes. And sometimes a great deal more - given out of no reserve, nothing held back, except abiding confidence that "God is Good" and will provide in the future as God has in the past.

And that is Stewardship. Good gifts for God's good works given by God's good people. Stewardship. Good gifts for God's good works given by God's good people.

And to be sure - it is more than just a widow's thing. The bell for faithfulness in giving rings for us all. Isaiah the prophet of the 6th. Century BC rang the bell for his people in a time of great trial and distress. Defeated, scattered far from their home, exiles in foreign lands, including today's Iraq and Iran.

Isaiah called the people back from the brink of nearly total faithlessness. Caught up in a culture of indulgence and excess, of corruption and moral decline, Isaiah recalls for his people the promises of God, and God's power to bring light to darkness and truth to falsehood. And new joy to life. And all God needs, Isaiah reminds his people, are people willing to listen, and to trust and obey.

John Gilgallon reminded us two weeks ago about what the heart of obedience is - It is to live up to the promises we make. And in our case, as Americans, we make a promise every time we use our money.

We write it - but maybe we should say it more often - In God We Trust.

And then, then, as the facts show - as a people - we are slow to stick with our promises.

We can argue the fine points of economics forever - more taxes, less taxes, use taxes, fee taxes, casino taxes...

Bottom line - blessed as we are, we are not the blessing we could be to God, to each other, and to others around the world. Our own country's social fabric is ripped and tearing. 40 kids + in Detroit classrooms - too often with out books or paper or pencils - 60 million or more americans uninsured. And an infant mortality rate highest among most other advanced nations. The highest prison population in the first world. Would more thanks giving change the picture? It surely wouldn't hurt?

But will we change the way we live? Can we live to do more than seek to enhance the level of our enjoyment of life? Or is this a valid purpose of our lives?

How hard it is not to think so... not to think that our enjoyment of life is the highest good.

Every where you and I look we are urged by images, and music, and now subtle scents in the stores I'm told , urged to treat ourselves well. To splurge a little. To tell ourselves we're worth it. Comfort and care well for our needs, but also our pleasures. Eat, drink and be merry - is our mantra.

And yet, and yet, there is a hunger, a deep human hunger, that nothing - no thing - can satisfy. And against the high tide of things for our physical comfort and pleasure, there is the constant steady wave beat of God's call to us to be at one with God and with God's will and plan for our lives.... Now ... and forever.

But it's hard to read and to hear Jesus' words in Luke. Jesus talks about sacrifice and suffering, about the cost of being faithful to Jesus Christ and his way. Real cost - Less goodies, less friends, even changed family situations. Jesus pulls no punches. There is a cost to discipleship - to living a worthy life.

This is not a gospel of prosperity, of riches and rewards

But it is a call to a happiness no money can buy and no thing can provide.

And even though Jesus talks about the kind of things we would rather not hear about or know about, famines and plagues, dreadful portents, betrayals and death...

I know people who have stopped taking a daily newspaper because the news is so often brutal and discouraging and depressing - and leading no where in the way of solutions.

And Jesus says - right in the face of what we face every day in a world not yet saved, Jesus says, be light in that darkness, resist the temptations, hold out for

the best and truest and kindest things life has to offer. Hold fast to this.

And you will gain... you will gain your soul.

And you and I know, we know, when we've gotten back a piece of our souls.

When we've given of ourselves with no thought of gain or credit in mind... then we are closest to being who we supposed to be as children of the living God.

The group in Mississippi this week will know this feeling many times - as resident after resident there will share their thanks givings, their gratitude, their appreciation For kindness shown and support given.

You know the feeling when you've done something truly good. There is a little knot of happiness that seems to live somewhere inside of you.

I wish I knew the way this could be what we experience when we write a check, or give an offering to the Church, the sense of having done something right and good. I wish there were bells and whistles to honor those who give thanks to God faithfully - with little or no reward or recognition.

In truth we do this a bit poorly in the Church - in our Church. No award pins, no perfect attendance Sunday School pins, no prizes for each good deed we do!

We don't even print our names and amounts we give each year, as colleges and charities do.

We have no wall of fame where you and the record of your gift is on display.

We make it hard to help our egos grow, our pride increase, our record of doing good stand out for all to see. We have no gimmicks - no vials of holy water to bless and sell, no prayer clothes to give away.

All, all we have, all we have to share with you, for all you share with Christ and With Christ's Church, all we have to share are Jesus' words of blessing in Luke

... by your endurance you gain your soul. And in Matthew.... Whenever you

have done good to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. “

And - isn't that enough, isn't it? To please Jesus. To please God? Isn't that what life, the best kind of life, and the Christian life is all about? Isn't that what the widow did, and all the widows did that I remember during my ministry.

And - in truth - its what so many of you actually do in so many ways I know nothing about. You give thanks. You not only think about it - thank you Lord. You do it.... In word and deed. In gifts of time and treasure ... tithes and offerings.

It's how this Church is able to do all that it does --- for you - and for its members, And for the missionaries, and mission organizations we support all over our area and around the world.

Could we do more - could we - each one of us - give a little more or a lot?

I suspect we could.... I know I stretched, Mary and I stretched - to keep our pledge last year - and add the Building to Share pledge, too. We gave more - first - and maybe we were a little more careful with some discretionary spending - postponed a couple of things.... But ... nothing drastic happened .. except... We believe some good new things are happening and will be happening because we shared Shared out into the work of Christ's Church some of the blessings that had come to us by God's grace.

And I suspect the widow knew this too.... All the widows knew this to be true....

That when we give thanks - when we share God's gifts to us, as gifts for God's good work, we gain our souls - we become more nearly the people we are called to be in Christ.... God's hands and feet, bringing God's love care, more fully into God's world. And that is thanks giving. Amen.

