

## **A Small Extravagance**

Mark 12: 38-44

Rev. John Allen

I was listening to a story on a call in radio show recently about tipping.

There seemed to be a pretty strong social consensus about tipping for table service at a restaurant or for delivery, and service in a hotel. But things quickly got more controversial when it came to counter service at the coffee shop.

What ought one to do with the tip jar at the coffee shop?

Most thought that it was a good thing to do, given how little so many in food service get paid. Drop the change, or a dollar in the little cup. Or round up the transaction on your card.

But among the callers there was something that came up over and over that was really interesting. Many of those who called in to express their support for tipping confessed to a particular practice.

They always tried to make sure that the server was looking at them when they put the dollar in the tip jar. It wasn't only important to tip. But to be known as a good tipper.

And I understand it. Especially if it is someplace where you go often and you'd like to develop a good rapport. And a tip is kind of a way of saying thank you, and you want to be sure the person gets the message.

But I was surprised by just how far some people would go, by their own admission.

A fake cough to get attention. Or taking money back out to drop it in again more noticeably. A move that once got George Constanza banned from his favorite pizza shop in an episode of Seinfeld.

But it all goes to show something most of us know: it is nice to be recognized for being generous.

That is basically what the wealthy patrons in Jesus' story were doing.

They were standing by the containers where the offerings were collected for the Temple, the ancient version of the tip jar, and they wanted to be sure that people saw them putting their big donations in.

I know that they are the foil for the poor widow in this story, but let's not be too hard on them. They were doing a good thing. They were giving away their money to support the work of the

temple. They could have just kept it. There are much worse ways to be showy than by giving away your money in public.

They wanted to be recognized for their generosity. And who wouldn't.

Contrast them with the widow. Who comes forward quietly and without much of a show and puts her two meager coins into the jar. With no fanfare. No pomp. No recognition.

She gave more, Jesus says. Because out of her poverty, she gave extravagantly.

Anyone around Jesus who would have insisted on mathematical accuracy would have challenged him immediately. Because of course, she didn't give more. She gave less.

And her two cents wouldn't do nearly as much good for the temple as the larger gifts of the wealthy.

But such math does not prevail in the kingdom of God.

And Jesus is teaching the kind of extravagance that God desires. Not an extravagance of material, but an extravagance of the heart.

We do not know anything about this woman other than the coins she dropped in the treasury that day, and the fact that she was a widow.

But that simple act is one of such extraordinary faith. No one would have blamed her for keeping what little she had for herself. I wouldn't blame her. I know Christ wouldn't have condemned her for it.

And yet, she felt God's love so abundantly. She believed in the importance of God's work in the world so completely, that she needed to respond with the most extravagant generosity she could muster.

And she did, scraping together those two coins and carrying them pressed in her palm, through the crowded dusty streets, right into the heart of the city, to the temple of the Lord.

It was the extravagance of her heart Christ saw that day. It is the extravagance of her heart that shine across the generations as a witness to us today.

I once was part of church where a couple, a few years into their retirement they made a gift to their church of one million dollars. And they made a gift in the same amount to an historically black congregation in a nearby city.

During a visit, I had a chance to speak with them a little about why they did that. It was after all, most of what they had. They had to change the way they were living quite a bit to afford that gift.

And it meant having a very difficult conversation with each of their children informing them that they should not expect any inheritance.

Why make that gift? What they told me is that they prayed, and were convinced that their church needed the money more than they did, that it would make more faithful use of it than they would, and that—and this is a direct quote— “the most important thing we want to leave to our children, is a thriving church.”

Two million dollars is hardly the widows coins, and it was certainly extravagant in the numerical sense.

But it was also an extravagance of the heart. It is hard to get past the size of the gift, but what truly sticks with me the most from knowing this couple is how profoundly they loved the church, and how deeply they believed that the very best legacy they could leave in this world, was the a thriving Christian witness.

I know another good story about an extravagant donor.

In 1912 Rev. Russell H. Conwell told a story to his congregation in Philadelphia about a young child in the church named Hattie Mae Wyatt.

Hattie was always bothered that there was never quite enough space for all the children at Sunday school. She expressed this frequently to her pastor who would always tell her that they would love to build a bigger Sunday School, but couldn't afford it.

Unbeknownst to anyone, Hattie set out to change that. She started saving pennies in a small pouch in her room, whenever she could she would tuck some change into that little purse.

One day Hattie presented it to her pastor. 57 cents. To get started on that new building.

It was a charming little story to round out his sermon. And no doubt, an extravagance of that young child's heart.

But then something extraordinary happened.

A few weeks later, people in the church were still talking about those 57 cents. A few folks stepped forward to say they could make some larger gifts toward a building fund. But it still all seemed like a dream, until a loan officer at a local bank called the pastor.

He had heard the story and talked with the board and president at the bank. They were prepared to offer the church a loan to start construction on their building, at a very competitive interest rate, and they would accept Hattie's 57 cents as the only downpayment.

The number doesn't matter. God is looking for the extravagance of our hearts. What makes the gift extravagant is when it is given away in faith, and given in hope.

So here is the question each of us faces.

What extravagance can we offer as our grateful and faithful response to God's love?

This is our Stewardship Season. It is a time when we are each asked to make our financial commitment to the church for the coming year.

What is extravagant gift can you offer to our ministry here?

But don't just think about this in terms of the money you give to the church.

How can you live your life with extravagant generosity?

How can you offer the love of your heart extravagantly?

How can you offer your time and energy extravagantly?

How can you offer your hope and faith extravagantly?

It is not about what is big or what is small.

It is not about what feels important or unimportant.

Even the littlest things each of us does with a generous and hopeful heart can change everything.

Earlier this week a young man stopped by our church who I had never met before, and who I doubt I will ever see again. He is newly unhoused. And although he is working full-time in this community, he cannot find a place to live that he can afford. He is working on that, and the biggest impediment he was facing is that he did not have any ID.

A Maine ID card costs \$5, and he also needed a place to make a few photocopies of some documents and print a few things out.

We paid for his ID, he used our copier, and we arranged for someone to give him a ride to the DMV.

I wanted you to know that story in case you only have \$5 to give to the church and worry that it wouldn't make a difference. It made all the difference in the world to someone this week.

\$5 and a few sheets of copy paper.

Yesterday we held a Memorial Service here for a young woman who left this life too soon, and this room was filled with her friends and families, who came to pour out grief and to find in this sacred place what we do week after week, refuge, sanctuary, comfort, and the presence of God's love.

And several volunteers from our church were here, with truly extravert hearts, to extend the very best of our hospitality to this community that needed a place to mourn.

If you look around this room, and this building, you will see everywhere the extravagant hearts of this place, lifting voices in song, hearts in prayer, and hands in service.

And my prayer is that we all leave this place inspired to live with the same spirit of extravagant hospitality and love in every place our lives lead us throughout the week.

It's not about the number.

That is what Jesus was trying to help his followers understand, as he pointed them toward that anonymous woman nearly lost in the crush of the crowd.

Generosity is simply an expression of the extravagance of our hearts.