

November 15, 2020  
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“She Gave Everything”

She gave everything. That is what Jesus tells his disciples about the widow mentioned in this parable. She gave everything.

She had very little money. But she gave. She had very little status. But she gave. She had no influence. But she gave. And not only did she give; she gave everything.

In fact, the Greek says that she gave her whole life. Not a tithe. Not a gift. Not a pledge. Not a portion. She gave her whole life.

In the Advent boxes that were passed out over the past week and we will finish up this week... in the Advent boxes there is a stewardship letter talking about the state of the finances of Acacia Park as we ended 2020 with the pandemic coming through the Chicagoland area much harsher and unforgiving this time. The Advent boxes include a pledge card if your finances allow you to make a pledge this year and your third quarter statement if you made a donation to the church this year. The annual stewardship sermon is a little different this year, but the needs of everyone are so different.

During the pandemic some of us who lived on fixed incomes have found very little change to our income, but the expenses are different. Some people find no change; they still have their jobs, and the way they live life is different, but finances have not hit them too much. Then we have the congregation members who have been hit really hard by the pandemic. Income changes, expenses changes, and lifestyle changes have made this a really difficult year.

Yet we continue on. We give all we have to all aspects of our lives - our jobs, our families, our partners, our communities, and our church. Acacia Park has been holding steady throughout 2020 due to the PPP stimulus package provided in April and a grant from the synod. It was noticed that some people stopped giving to the church in March while others who were able to give a little more upped giving a little. This helped us balance the year out. However, I am going to be a little blunt - without knowing when another stimulus package for small businesses will be provided, money is going to begin getting tight and harder decisions will need to be made in 2021 than needed to be made in 2020. We needed to purchase quite a bit to get the church ready for virtual worship and fellowship as well as social-distanced in-person worship. Yet, again, some expense line items were no longer needed this year, and we had to make decisions to spend on things that were not on our radar for the year.

This stewardship sermon is pretty much, give if you can - we understand if you can't. And if you are comfortable, please consider upping your pledge a little more. Really, I guess it is not all that different this year than it is most years. It just feels more urgent and heavier this year.

There are other things found in the Advent box.

Pull out things, and talk about them.

The holidays are going to be different this year, and that sucks. There are no longer hotspots across the country. The entire country is a hot spot at this point with Illinois leading the way in infection rates. In order to keep hospitals from becoming overwhelmed and to care for our neighbors, we are being asked to wear masks, wash hands, keep social distance. But now, we are being asked to give up more, and that is our holiday gatherings and traditions this year.

This Advent we won't be able to gather together in the worship space. We won't be able to sing together as we light a candle on the Advent wreath each week. No hanging of the greens and decorating the tree together. Yet we can keep the traditions and create new ones. We can come to worship this year with our whole selves. With less distractions, fewer gatherings, less focus on being busy during the season and more time at home - this is an opportunity for us to experience the season much like the widow in the parable came to give her whole life.

When was the last time we came to worship ready to give our whole life? The last time we celebrated the coming of our savior on Christmas morning with our whole life? We may think we have in the past, but this year, we may experience this holy season just a bit differently. We may experience it a little more intimately. We may see Jesus in the traditions a little more, like in this scripture. This is often used as a stewardship sermon, like I did for the first part of the sermon. But when this woman is shrunk down to simply an example of generous giving, we are missing so much.

This Christmas season, without all of the extra to capture our attention, we may be able to open our eyes differently and see a little more. In this passage, the widow giving everything is similar to how we are behaving in the face of a dangerous pandemic. We are giving up so much to keep ourselves and our neighbors safe. We are giving everything we have to keep others safe. We also cannot miss that her offering of her life foreshadows Jesus' own act for us. To what extent Jesus points her out, not to give us justification for a stewardship sermon, or to call attention to our own lives of service, but that in her he sees what he must do. Jesus will have to give his whole life, his entire life. He already did, in fact, prior to the cross. He constantly embraced rejection. He consistently accepted the questioning of his followers. He confirmed over and over again that following him would mean whole-life giving and whole-life living. The widow's example should be nothing new and at the same time should be everything new.

She embodies Jesus' own ministry. She acts out Jesus' own call. She believes that what she does will manifest itself in something beyond herself. We are starting to read through the Gospel of Mark now. We are entering a new gospel to read through for the year, and this is so true to Mark. In the end, the widow's action of giving her whole self is truly discipleship according to Mark, that is truly salvific according to Mark, and it is what Jesus portrays according to Mark. But more so, according to Mark, this is the essence of God.

God knows nothing else than to give God's whole life. 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.

God calls us to whole life living. That's what discipleship is all about.

Amen.