

## **A Small Extravagance**

*Rev. John Allen*

I was listening to a story on Boston Public Radio last week about tipping. The question was whether or not you should tip for counter service at a coffee shop. The callers were pretty evenly divided on whether or not to tip. 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 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 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 would 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 know a couple who attend a congregational church not far from here.

A few years into their retirement they made a gift to their church of one million dollars. 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 could not expect to inherit anything from the estate.

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.”

One 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.

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.

I know another 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 her 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.

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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.

A few weeks ago a man stopped by our church who I had never seen before, and who I doubt I will ever see again. He had his young son with him. They were living out of their car. He had a friend in North Carolina who was ready to take them in, and help him find work, and he had everything he needed to get down there, he stopped by the

church to see if we had any diapers we could give him. It was the only thing he didn't have that he needed to get on the road.

I bought them a pack of diapers with \$40 from my discretionary fund.

We also went back into the kitchen in Johnson Hall and got some leftover food, and some snacks, and drinks for the ride.

We grabbed a few crayons and some paper from the Christian Ed. closet to help pass the time on the ride.

I wanted you to know that story in case you gave the church \$40 last year and felt like it wasn't much. It was everything that family needed that day.

I wanted you to know that story in case you have ever brought food for coffee hour, and left something behind in the fridge, it mattered more than you realized.

I wanted you to know that in case you could drop .57 cents in the plate today to help us buy a few more crayons.

It's not about the number.

It is about each of us finding a way to live extravagantly generous lives. Putting our faith in God, to do something extraordinary with whatever gifts we bring forward.

