

## **Together We Give**

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Our gospel reading tells a story of extravagant generosity. Jesus sits in the temple and does a bit of people watching as he observes people putting their money in the temple offering. And a widow comes along who empties her pockets and Jesus says that she is the one who has given the most even though she had little to give. The rest, he said, gave out of their abundance, but she gave all she could, trusting that God would provide. For Jesus, the widow is the example of generosity.

But I must confess, I find this message in Scripture, and especially in the gospels so hard. It seems like Jesus is so demanding when it comes to money. He says things like, “No one can be my follower unless he or she give up all their possessions.” “It is harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” “Go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor.” And then this passage where he tells the story of the widow who gave everything she had to live on. I don’t know about you, but I don’t have the faith to empty my entire checking account into the offering basket in a few minutes.

But I know people who do have that faith. Most of you know that for the first ten years of my pastoral career, I was the pastor of a church made up of people living in deep poverty. Every Sunday in church, I saw homeless people empty their pockets in the offering basket, literally placing every single cent they have in the offering.

But there is one individual who I think of more than anyone else when I read this passage about the widow— he was a man named Melvin. Now Melvin has some cognitive disability and is also an alcoholic. It was not uncommon for me to walk out onto my porch early in the morning and find Melvin curled up asleep on my porch. He had several favorite porches that he would end up at after a night drinking. But every Sunday, Melvin would go to church and empty his pockets in the offering basket. But Melvin’s generosity went beyond just giving loose coins. He would often stay after to clean up, to sweep and mop. But the greatest act of his generosity was what he did for another church member, a woman who suffered both from schizophrenia and dementia.

I won’t say her real name but we’ll call her Sharon. She lived in an apartment unit and had no family in town to care for her. Melvin and some other people from the church would do her grocery shopping and make sure her bills were paid. But over the years, Sharon’s schizophrenia got dramatically worse and she refused to pay her water bill because she believed that the water company was piping poison gas into her apartment through the pipes, so she had the water turned off. When she needed to go to the bathroom, she went in her bathtub – with no water to clean it up. And every day, Melvin would go to her house, use money from his own disability check to buy cleaning supplies, and clean out her bathtub for her. I didn’t even know he was doing this until Sharon told me that he cleaned for her for several weeks. I confirmed with Melvin and he just said yeah like it was no big deal. He cleaned out her bathtub every single day until we were able to get her into a residential program for psychiatric patients.

Melvin's daily life consisted of waking up on someone's porch, finding someone who would feed him breakfast, going to a nearby soup kitchen for lunch, then cleaning Sharon's bathtub and making sure she had food to eat and water to drink, leaving to start drinking, and eventually winding up on someone's porch. He would wake up and repeat the exact same thing day after day after day.

Now if you or I just saw Melvin on the street, we would simply say – he's a drunk. But if you know him, you would say, he is one of the most generous people I have ever known – certainly more generous than I am because I am not willing to empty my pockets every week in the offering plate and I am certainly not willing to go every single day to clean urine and manure out of a schizophrenic woman's bathtub. He gave his money in a way that I am not willing to give and he gave of himself in a way that I am not willing to give. And when I think about Melvin, I hear Jesus' words ringing in my ears, "This woman has given more than all the others. For they gave out of their wealth but she gave out of her poverty."

So what does someone like Melvin teach us about generosity. I think it's simply this: Melvin teaches us to dare to be generous in a way that stretches us and makes us uncomfortable. If we don't feel it, then our giving is not really generosity. To truly be generous means that our giving – both of our money and of ourselves – should mean that we are sacrificing something. That we feel it. So in that sense, being generous is not primarily something we do to help somebody else (though that's a great outcome), rather being generous is something we need to do for our own sake. By being generous we learn to trust in God rather than in our money or possessions. And while I certainly don't think any of us should start drinking at 4 in the afternoon and end up on someone's porch, there is great freedom in trusting that our needs will be provided for, to allow people to care for us rather than thinking we have to be self-sufficient independent units all the time. In short generosity teaches us that we are a part of a community that we give to and receive from. It teaches us that we're all in this together.

And it's that communal nature of generosity that allows us to make an impact on the world around us. Next week is pledge Sunday when all of us are invited to make our financial commitment to support the church next year. And it's easy to think of pledging and giving to the church in terms of simply paying the bills. You know, we have to make sure our building is kept up. We have to make sure our staff are able to be paid – thank you very much by the way. And all of that is true. Your giving does those things. But also, giving to the church is a way for us to recognize that we can have more of an impact together than any of us could alone. Very few people have the financial resources to have a substantial impact just as an individual. But if each of us are generous with what we have, then collectively, that generosity can have an incredible impact.

You already know this to be true because over the years you have leaned into generosity time and time again, even when it seemed risky. You built the Centre School after 9/11 crashed the economy. You raised ½ a million dollars to build the youth room so that teenagers could have a safe space to go. We open our building up to all sorts of people and organizations so they have a safe, comfortable place to meet. There is literally something good happening in this building

seven days/week. And your giving means that we have come out of the pandemic in a pretty decent financial position.

But here's the thing about generosity. We never get to a place where we can say we are generous enough. I haven't been Melvin's pastor for seven years, but his example still challenges me because the way that Melvin gives of himself reminds me that I can be more generous than I am now. I know that our church can be more generous than we are now. I would love for our church to be in a place where we not only ask the question, "How much do we need to give to sustain what we are doing now?" but instead I want to invite you to go one step further and dream a little bit. Think about what we could do, the impact we might be able to make in Milton and in greater Boston if we lean into generosity even more.

And friends, please know that all gifts are important. If you are worried that you don't have a lot of money to give, remember the story that Jesus told. Remember the story of Melvin. We all have something significant to contribute. When I am asked what is the appropriate amount to give, my answer is always, "a personally significant contribution" – whatever that means for you.

So friends that is the challenge that is before us – both as individuals and as a faith community – to live more and more into God's call of generosity as we give of our time, our service, and, yes, of our money. In doing so, we learn to trust God more, we build a church that is able to expand our impact in the community, and we live more fully into the reality of the kingdom of God where there is more than enough for everybody if we just have the faith to give of ourselves and of our resources. Amen.