

First Congregational Church of Hollis, NH
The Rev. Robert B. Macfarlane, Interim Minister
Sunday - August 10, 2014

“Err on the Side of Generosity”
Mark 12: 41 - 44

I want to tell you that one of the most powerful images I have while being among you, was the Sunday morning when Darryl Stam was speaking to us about giving to the Settled Pastor Search Fund. He stood right here, hovering over the offering plate, wrote his check, and plopped it in the plate. And then he challenged us all to do likewise. And a great many of you have done so! Yes, that was indeed a powerful image of erring on the side of generosity. Let me ask you a question: “What is the one sermon subject which Ministers try to avoid like the plague, and which parishioners wish their ministers would indeed avoid as well? Anyone. Shout out an answer.

YES! The answer is MONEY!

NO minister I’ve ever met, likes to preach about money. And in all my 44 years of ministry, I haven’t met ONE Parishioner who desperately pleaded with the minister to preach about money. “Pastor, we just haven’t heard a great sermon about giving more to the church. Don’t you suppose you could grace us with such a sermon? I can’t speak for my friends in the other pews, but as for me, I need some extra motivation to give better and well.” Now I don’t recall any one of you who might have asked me that question.

Well, that is, with one exception. The Church Treasurer ALWAYS could be counted upon, to smile broadly, when I would even REMOTELY breach the subject of cold hard cash. The budget – remember the budget – needs to be balanced! The bills need to be paid! Summer is always tough, because attendance is often down, and pledge envelopes are fewer, but the bills continue to roll in.

So I don’t preach about money. Instead, I preach about GENEROSITY.

Let us return to our scripture, where we just heard the familiar story about the widow, and her famous “MITE.” Two mites, to be exact. Jesus is always telling stories to his people, just like so many of YOU, tell me YOUR stories. And that is so important, that you continue to tell your unique and special stories, because that is how we connect as a people of God, and how we draw closer as one family in Christ. Telling stories is really what those Supper Circles are all about - story-telling around the dinner table is one of the VERY BEST ways to get to know your neighbors more deeply and more caringly.

Anyway, we have this widow, who Jesus observes walking into the Temple on a certain day. Scripture says that Jesus has set himself down opposite the TEMPLE TREASURY, of all places, and he watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. And he saw how so many rich people put in large sums. And then a poor widow came, and put in two small copper coins, which were together worth about a penny. In the King James Version of the Bible, it speaks of those two small copper coins, as “two mites.” And thus was born the story of the widow’s mite.

So Jesus then, does as he often did. He called his disciples together, for another “teachable moment.” Diana and I, as parents, often had such “teachable moments” with our own kids over their growing up years. It is what the dinner table is for - or at least it USED to be for, before so many activities outside the home, have relegated the family dinner table conversation to the extinct dinosaur bin.

But Jesus brought his disciples close, and pointed out to them what had just transpired with this poor widow who had walked in and given her two mites. “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had - all she had to live on.” The cynic and the pessimist in today’s society, instead of internalizing the moral of Jesus’ story, is more apt to sit in laughter and scorn at the gift of the widow. “It means NOTHING!” Two pennies? I don’t even pick up a penny on the ground any more. It is not worth my while or my energy. I throw my pennies to the man holding a sign on the street corner. Don’t even TALK to me of the widow’s mite!

I think of the immense story all over the news in these last weeks, the story of the colossal battle between two men, we'll just call them Arthur S, and Arthur T. I don't know how many times I've tooted my horn, to encourage those Market Basket workers to hold their heads and their signs high. They are caught in a battle over what we might say is fundamental about American values. Shall workers be seen only as expendable cogs in the giant wheel of making fortunes for someone else? Or shall workers be seen as people who are providing for their families, who take great pride in the service they perform for their customers, and who have developed a deep and abiding loyalty to one of the owners who treats them with dignity and as family?

Did not the widow give out of the deep generosity of her heart? Did not Arthur T. govern his business and his people with kindness and also with deep generosity? When someone sums up the qualities of a friend by saying, "He or she is a fine man or woman - who'd give you the shirt off his back. Which means, of course, that person would go the SECOND MILE for you; that person could be counted upon; that person never said "No," when the chips were down.

So it is, that, no, I don't like to preach about money, but I DO SAY THIS, when the conversation centers about how we treat others when it comes to remunerating services rendered. I have tried to live my life by this watchword: ***"Err on the side of generosity."***

Let me pose a question: When you figure your tip for the wait person, do you hover over the bill, trying to come up with 18.5 % or whatever? Of course not. If the bill is \$30 for dinner, the tip is immediately \$6, because 3 doubled is \$6. Now if the bill is \$32, you could write down the tip as \$6.40, but instead, I err on the side of generosity, and I always move it up a DOLLAR, so the tip would be \$7. I hope that makes sense to you. Over the years, I have been personally inspired by the words from Proverbs, in the Message translation, which says: ***"The world of the generous gets larger and larger, and the world of the stingy gets small and smaller."***

And I would hope that as a Church, when you calculate your staff wages and benefits, when you figure how you'll allocate your mission gifts, when you offer your time and your talent to the ministries and missions of your church, it is my prayer for you, that you might not begrudge your giving, but that you give of your abundance with joy, and with gratitude, and with your own prayer that you may err on the side of generosity.

Why? Because it is what Jesus wants of us. Because it is the RIGHT thing to do. And because we know in our heart of hearts, that generosity of spirit always comes back to us. Because generosity has an incredible multiplying effect. The more you give away, the more you have! It's like love, really. The more love you give, the more that comes back to you. Our generosity is something like the garden planted with zucchinis. The more you give away, the more that multiplies in its place, and the more you have to keep giving away. And if you didn't give it away, no one person could possibly cook that many zucchini breads and casseroles and whatever else you do with them.

You see, I learned a long time ago, just as did the widow with her mite, just as Jesus continued to teach his disciples, that God is a GENEROUS GOD. God is NOT a STINGY God! God is an INCREDIBLE God, who errs on the side of generosity in an immense way, to each and every one of us, each and every day.

A Sunday ago, just like earlier this morning, I asked you, "Are you ready?" Are you ready to walk into your new future? Are you ready to take a step forward into somewhat unknown and uncharted waters? Many of you answered with a strong, declarative YES, we ARE ready!" Others may still be a bit timid about the prospect. But this Interim Minister, as he passes the torch to your newly introduced "Bridge" Interim, to Rev. Bonnie Stagg, he has seen with his eyes, and felt with his heart, and is confident within his soul, that you are a strong and capable and eager people, a congregation who, whether you realize it or not, are a people eager to err on the side of generosity, to err on the side of love, to err on the side of compassion, to risk on the side of friendship, and to go boldly into places you may not necessarily have been before.

And why can you trust yourself to go boldly, to be more generous than you think possible, and to be more loving than you thought possible? Why? Because you have learned that no matter who you are, God welcomes you as you are. And you have learned that no matter what your station in life, that you are loved beyond your wildest imagination.

AMEN.