

**Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.**

**September 30, 2018 Pentecost XIX**

**Grace and Holy Trinity Church**

**Richmond, Virginia**

***Mark 9:38-50***

*John said to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.*

*“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.*

*“For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”*

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**I want to talk this morning about money. I am looking at this from two sides, two perspectives...one side is focused on the spiritual aspect, the heart from which we give...and the other side focuses on to what we give, the church.**

**I heard a sermon once where the priest took off his stole, because he said that he was laying aside his priestly role, to talk about money. It was as if this was a taboo even dirty subject. I am going to leave my stole on, because it is actually part of my role as a clergy person to talk about money. It is part of my role to have conversations with you about what is real, what is significant, what is important. Money is part of that.**

Much more importantly, I speak to you as someone who has been baptized and marked as Christ's own forever. You share that baptism and we are sisters and brothers together. Baptism is my most essential credential and yours as well. And it is truly part of living into our baptisms to be generous givers. Giving money away is an important act of thanksgiving to God and at the same time it fuels the mission of the church.

My baptismal certificate hangs on the wall of my office. It certifies that on November 14, 1954 I was made a member of Christ, a child of God, an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven. I was only three months old at the time. I am told I was cute, and that I cried at the top of my lungs when the organ started playing.

Regardless, I did nothing to earn what God gave me in baptism. It was grace. It was a gift. "You are a child of God!" And baptism was the beginning of a journey. And part of that journey involved giving financial support to the church which had been the vehicle of God's grace to me in the first place.

I did the usual things a kid did in the 1950s and 60s, where giving was concerned in the Episcopal Church. I grew up in the Episcopal Church, though I think over 50% of folks in the Episcopal Church now grew up in other traditions, which is great, and adds so much richness to our life together.

At any rate, I grew up in the Episcopal Church and I did what we did. I had envelopes. I used mite boxes. I had one of those cards where you could slide pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters into the slots. I was in church every Sunday because that was a priority for my parents. It became a priority for me as well, by the time I was in high school. I enjoyed serving in various ministries.

Time moved on. I grew up. I got married and I remained active in church, eventually I was ordained. But before that...I wasn't ordained until I was thirty... before that, there was a time in my twenties when I thought, "I'll give more meaningfully when I get on my feet, when I have enough. In the meantime, other people who have more than me, can take care of it."

But I had a series of epiphanies which put me on the road to more generous giving. First of all, I realized that it is possible to live your whole life and to never feel like you have enough. Remember the story told about an early 20<sup>th</sup> century robber baron when asked, “How much is enough?” and he said, “One more dollar than I have right now.” I just needed to let go and trust and give. I did...and the sky did not fall.

And then, the Episcopal Church had started talking about tithing, giving ten percent away. I married a Baptist and she grew up with this. She had two piggy banks. When she got a dollar, 90 cents went into her personal fund, and a dime went into the church’s and God’s piggy bank. She grew up with it. It was new to me.

But the challenge was, think about your giving as a percentage of your income, not simply as dollars, but as a percentage.....how much you have under your control and what proportion of that you give away. Everyone can do this. I mean, I am math impaired, and I can do it! I know how to move a decimal point one space to the left. Having “enough” is not the driving factor.

When I first started thinking about proportionate giving, and did the math I discovered I was only giving between 1% and 2% away. I had another epiphany, it was this: the church meant a lot more to me than that. I wanted to write a better thank you note to God, than that.

Now along with this talk about proportionate giving the concept of giving of the “first fruits” was also highlighted. This was another epiphany. “Rather than giving what is left over after all other possible claims on (my) resources are satisfied, (it was suggested, why not) give to God ‘off the top’ and adjust... other spending priorities in light of that commitment.” It was a matter of setting priorities and regularly honoring those priorities, day by day, week by week, month by month.<sup>1</sup> It felt good.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.churchleadership.com/uncategorized/people-too-busy-to-serve-teach-them-to-steward-their-time/?id=li20180829>

And I am not saying I got where I wanted to be right away. But these new ways of thinking- proportionately and giving the first fruits- showed me the possibilities, the opportunities.

Now, you know Jesus was always flipping the script, reversing the usual expectations. You can see this in our gospel this morning and over the past few weeks. Being the Messiah was not, as expected, a ticket to easy street. Nor was being the Messiah's followers leading to a life of ease. Jesus said, "If your hand causes you to stumble, or your eye, or your foot...cut it off, pluck it out...it is better to enter the kingdom of God maimed, than to end up being thrown into hell." Jesus is clear here, and in other places, about the challenge of following him. People were surprised by this even as they learned that a life dedicated to Jesus was more profound, more joyous, and real than they could ever have imagined.

Jesus knew the power of giving, and his take on giving, not surprisingly, flips the script. You remember, he was in Jerusalem, sitting around the Temple, at the treasury. He was watching people as they came and made contributions. The Bible says, "Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which make a penny. And Jesus called his disciples together and said, 'Truly, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. They gave out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty gave everything she had.'" (Mark 12:41ff)

It is not the amount, it is the proportion, the percentage that tells the story in Jesus' eyes. That is Jesus' stewardship or generosity sermon and it celebrates what is going on in that woman's heart, not the actual amount that is given. Her gift is greatest because of what it represents for her.

Now, let me hasten to add, I fall far short. That widow is a much better and more generous person than I am. But she helps me look at what is important. She helps me look at my own heart, my own faith, my own response to God's generosity.

So, that is one side of the equation...the heart, the faith from which we give. That widow in Jesus' day was also giving to something. She was giving to the Temple. Nowadays, lots of Jewish congregations or synagogues, are

called temples. But in Jesus' day, there was one Temple and it was in Jerusalem. "Everybody realized that this was the one most sacred place on earth, the one place on earth where somehow heaven and earth meet..."<sup>2</sup> The Temple was important and people gave to support it. That widow did.

We give to the Church. For us, heaven is joined to earth and earth to heaven in the waters of the baptismal font, and at the altar with the Holy Eucharist and in the life of this community gathered in Jesus' name. We give to support this place and this community of love and mutual care. We give so that together we can feed our spiritual hungers, and so that we can feed the physically hungry as well, and work to transform the world. We give to the church, so that worship and service can happen in and out of this place.

Making a pledge to your church, making a gift is a matter of the heart, it grows from your faith. Your pledge and gift also goes to support the Body of Christ, the Church. This is why we give...to express thanks, to put our faith into action, and to empower mission.

Soon you will be asked to make a financial commitment to Grace and Holy Trinity Church for 2019. This is not an obligation, as much as it is an opportunity. Give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver, as St. Paul said.

I encourage you, think first of God's grace, and then I encourage you to think proportionately and generously in response. I encourage you to give regularly, as befits the grace we receive day in and day out. Let your faith and love and gratitude speak. And, out of this, may we all, in some small way, be like that widow who touched Jesus' heart. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/portrait/temple.html>