

Becoming: Who We Are Meant to Be
Who We Are Meant to Be: Generous!
Luke 21:1-4

There's a story about a farmer known for the award-winning corn he grew. Each year he entered his corn in the state fair where it won a blue ribbon. One year a newspaper reporter interviewed him and learned something interesting about how he grew it. The reporter discovered that the farmer shared his seed corn with his neighbors.

"How can you afford to share your best seed corn with your neighbors when they are entering corn in competition with yours each year?" the reporter asked.

The farmer said, "That's the way my corn stays good." The reporter didn't understand so the farmer explained. "The wind picks up pollen from the ripening corn and swirls it from field to field. If my neighbors grow inferior corn, cross-pollination will steadily degrade the quality of my corn. If I am to grow good corn, I must help my neighbors grow good corn."

I know this is a corny illustration, but what is an agricultural truth is also a spiritual truth. As we share with others we also get blessed. As it says in the Old Testament, *"Give generously, for your gifts will return to you later."* (Ecclesiastes 11:1, Living Bible). Jesus expressed the truth this way: *"Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap."* (Luke 6: 38 NIV) The Apostle Paul said it like this: *"Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously."* (2 Corinthians 9:6 NIV)

If we are to have good things, we must help our neighbors to have good things.

In this series we are talking about who God is calling us to be as a church and each week I feel like we are talking about the most important topic there is. The first week I thought helping people feel connected again is the most important thing we can do this year. Then, the next week, I felt worship, and helping people receive hope from God, is the most important. Then the next week, Pastor Jevon talked about our seeking justice, and I thought, no, that's the most important. Then last week, I felt being difference makers is most important.

Well, one thing's for sure, none of these are unimportant. But today, I believe God would say, "St. Luke's if you get one thing right this year, if there's one thing our world needs desperately, it's for you to live generously."

Now, you can take your hand off your wallet. Don't hide the checkbook. I'm not going to focus on giving your money, because generosity has to do with so much more than our money. Living generously is about living with a desire to bless other people with everything we've got.

To help us I want us to think about this topic, I want to look at a story we affectionately call, The Widow's Mite—the widow Jesus pointed out to his disciples as she put her last two coins in the temple treasury. It's often told as an example of generosity.

Before getting into this story, I need to offering a warning, like the ones you see on TV before certain shows: "The content you are about to see may be disturbing. Viewer discretion is advised."

I have always loved this story. I always believed Jesus pointed out an old widow giving all she has as a paragon of giving. But as I have studied this story anew, I have come to an understanding that shakes that interpretation and puts a whole different spin on the story, but, one I believe is truer to the real meaning of this story and offers a more significant understanding of what it means to live generously.

You see this story actually begins with the preceding verse. Jesus has been in the temple court having tense back and forths with religious leaders. He says of the scribes, "*They devour widow's houses and for sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.*" (Luke 20:47) What does this mean? How did scribes devour widows' homes?

Scribes were people devoted to interpreting scripture. Scribes helped people understand what God expects of them. They were not to take payment for this work. They were to support themselves. But over time scribes convinced people that their work needed full devotion, so they would encourage people to support them financially.

Now, not all scribes did this. And even those who received funds from people didn't mean they all abused the privilege. But there were others; others less scrupulous. They played on the good will of people to get gifts and resources, especially widows. You see, women did not have full rights in that time. They depended on men to handle legal affairs for them. If a widow did not have a son or brother or brother-in-law, she was without representation. So the temple leadership would send scribes to help widows with their estates. You can see where this is going. Some scribes would pretend to care for the widows' situation. They would even pray lengthy, showy prayers that would influence widows to ask such scribes to be their trustees. Once in that position they were able to claim for themselves a widow's estate. It was one of the big scams of that time.

You know, I believe people today who scam the elderly will have a special place reserved for them in you-know-where. And if you want to know what I really think about that, just ask me sometime. Well, that's how Jesus felt about these scammers. It angered him. He said they will face condemnation. But remember, these scammers were not mafia members. They were not criminals. They were religious people. They were people who studied the scriptures, scriptures that commanded the care and support of widows. But somewhere along the way, they got caught up in a system that allowed them to violate what they really believed. It's easy to get down on the scribes, on the religious system of Jesus' day, but Jesus points it out to remind us, it can happen anywhere.

Do you recognize these people? Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. They were some of the first big time television evangelists to be brought down by scandal. They founded the PTL Club, which stands for Praise the Lord. They built a little city called Heritage USA with hotels and retreat centers and where they had a deluxe studio to produce their daily program. But in the end, Jim and Tammy divorced and Jim Bakker went to prison for defrauding people of millions of dollars.

But they weren't always like that. If she were still alive, you could just ask my wife's grandmother. She lived most of her life in Texarcana, but after her husband died, she became a widow and was terribly lonely. She moved to a retirement community in Little Rock where Susan's parents lived at the time. She started watching the PTL Club everyday, because a woman named Tammy Faye would always sing and look at the camera and tell people, you can make it. You are not forgotten. God is watching over you. And gave her daily encouragement.

Susan's mom became concerned when she found out that her mother was sending money to PTL, but hey, it's granny's money. She can do with it what she wants. She had become a big fan of PTL and after send as much money as she did, she earned a special donor status. That would give her two nights in a luxury hotel and her name would be on a commemorative wall. So one day Susan's sister decided to take her grandmother to visit PTL.

They flew to Charlotte, rented a car and drove to Heritage. She anticipated this trip like a spiritual pilgrimage, but things started to dampen as soon as they arrived. The hotel clerk told her grandmother she needed a credit card in order to check in. Well, she didn't use credit cards. "All I have is my checkbook," she said. "We can't take checks," was the reply. "Really?" she said, "you take my check when I send it to you every month!"

Their room turned out not to be so luxurious. Then, they couldn't spend a second night in that room. They had to change for some reason. When her grandmother wanted to attend a workshop, she was told, "Sorry. You didn't register." She said, "But I thought my special donor status meant I didn't have to register." The girl simply said, "Sorry, I don't know a thing about that. But Praise the Lord!" Everyone said, "Praise the Lord!"

It all started to feel fake and unreal. And in many ways it was. It would come out later, of course, that Jim Bakker had swindled a lot of people out of their money, many elderly people, especially widows. He would be arrested and sent to jail. But it wasn't all fake. Somewhere way back of all the cameras, and lights, and fancy studios and hotels, there was a desire to help people know that God cares about them. But along the way keeping up the system became the mission.

Jesus complained about a religious system that allowed good people to lose their way and forget who they are called to be. That's when he looked up at people putting money in the collections at the temple, and noticed wealthy people putting in large amounts, and then a poor widow putting in two small coins, and said to his disciples, ***"this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed***

out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.” Why did Jesus say that?

Let’s understand everything about this picture. First, the collection containers were located in the part of the temple known as the Courtyard of Women, an area inside of temple grounds where all Jewish men and women could gather. Around the courtyard were 13 trumpet-chests for people to put in money to support various needs of the temple. What better place to put them than where the largest number of people gathered, right? The trumpets where you tossed your coins were made of bronze, so when you dropped a coin on them you could hear the coin hit the metal. In this time, more valuable coins were larger and heavier. They made a bigger thud. If you wanted to impress people you made sure they heard your coin when you dropped it in.

But this woman contributed the two smallest coins in currency known as *lepta*. Here is an actual *lepta* coin from 35 AD. Before Thanksgiving I delivered some Advent kits and went to Jim Nahrwold’s house. He didn’t know I was coming until calling him 5 minutes beforehand. But when I got there he said he had something for me. His son is a coin collector and some years ago gave him an actual Roman *lepta* coin like the one used by the widow. He wanted me to have it. It’s made of copper and is about the size of the fingernail of my pinky finger! If you dropped this in the box, you wouldn’t even hear it. In terms of monetary value it was the most insignificant gift put in the box.

But Jesus, I guess by virtue of being the Son of God, knew this was all she had. She was willing to give her last two coins to support the temple system, a system that allowed some ruthless scammers to steal the homes of widows like her. She has become a product of a corrupt system. She has been so led to believe that she needs to give all she has regardless of her situation, and so she does.

Many scholars say that Jesus points her out not to commend her as a model of generosity, but out of lament for what religion had done. Their religion created a system that allowed poor widows to think giving away their last two coins is what God wants them to do.

See, I told you this might ruin this story for you. That’s a very different understanding than we usually take. We typically think Jesus praises her as a model of virtue. She’s the example of sacrificial giving. She gives out of poverty. Oh, we should all be like this widow. But Jesus is lamenting a religion that makes a widow feel this way. He is saddened over a system of religion that makes a person’s gift more valuable than the person.

So what’s the point of the story? It can’t be that generosity is unimportant. Jesus emphasized the importance of giving on too many occasions. He told a rich, young ruler to give away all he had. He told Zacchaeus to give away half of what he had. He said in another place, “It is better to give than receive.” No, Jesus can’t be against giving. In fact, that is what I believe he is teaching in this story.

Jesus wants a community that will give not take. Jesus didn't come to build a religion. The last thing he wants is a system that becomes something that has to be supported over the needs of people. That's why he pointed out this widow to his disciples. He wants a community that will look after people like this poor widow. That if God needs anything in this world, it's people who will be like this widow; people who don't go through life asking, "What do I have to give?" But rather, "What do I really need to keep?" Jesus wants people who will be generous toward the needs of others. And generosity involves so much more than money. It's about being generous with our words, our patience, our attention, our time.

I once knew a very wealthy man who was generous with his money. Oh, he could write a check let me tell you. But get him in a restaurant with a waiter that's a little slow and he could turn the air blue. It would sometimes undermine his generosity with money. No, generosity is about the heart. It is about our love of people. All people. It's about willingness to understand their situation in life, especially when it's different from our own. Living generously is about living with a desire to bless other people with everything we've got.

I want to invite us all to think about ways we can demonstrate generosity this week. First, think about the generosity of your words. Are there times someone does something you appreciate, or you were impressed by what they did, but you didn't tell them? You kept it to yourself? Look for ways to give generous compliments? Send notes, emails, even in the moment compliments.

Second, think about the generosity of noticing people. Be deliberate about going to folks you could easily walk past. The person mopping the floor. The attendant in the parking deck. Thank them for what they do. Pay attention to the people who cross your mind. Someone who you hear was sick. A neighbor you haven't seen in a while. Take the time to go knock on a door, or call, and just say, "I was thinking of you." That can be very generous.

Third, how can you be generous with people not expecting it? Has someone offended you? Has someone been rude? Has someone been caught up in themselves? They don't deserve your grace, but that's not what you wait for. Be generous in taking initiative to say to a person, "I just want you to know I'm sorry for whatever happened to disrupt a relationship."

And last of all, practice generosity with your money. Give a nice tip. If you can afford it, pay for someone behind you in the drive thru. Tell the attendant that someone from St. Luke's Methodist wanted to give a little gift. Look for other ways to gift people. And start asking, "What do I really need? And how much *can* I give?"

Maybe Jesus pointed out this widow not because he felt sorry for her, but because she had something to teach us. Maybe she was wiser than we realize. Perhaps she understood full well the system of her religion. Maybe she knew what went on behind the scenes and the scribes who cheated people. But she also knew not everyone was like that, and if wasn't careful she'd forget that fact. She would focus on the bad, and the

wrong and the unfair, and it would make her resentful stingy. And so she gave, because she knew that generosity was like a practice of resistance. It helped her resist fear, and bitterness, and believing the worst about people, and focusing on what others do or don't deserve. It helped keep her soul clean and free. We can't say for sure why she gave. Maybe she simply understood what the old corn farmer did, that if we want good things, we have to help our neighbors have good things.

Listen to Lisa Rockacy as she shares what this pandemic has taught her about generosity...