

The Greatest Gift (Love 2)
Hebrews 9:24-28 Mark 12:38-44

Last week we began a month-long sermon series on love, starting with the Greatest Commandment. You remember it, of course, "...You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" There is no other commandment greater than these."

The keys to the Christian faith, although you would be hard pressed to prove it sometimes, listening to the inflammatory rhetoric spewing forth from some supposedly Christian leaders. But then, there's always been a temptation to make the simple quite complex, hasn't there?

Today we move to the Greatest Gift.

As I sat down to begin work on today's sermon, I realized it would seem to be a real challenge today, from a preaching point of view with the introduction of our great Mission of the Month by Nancy and our absolutely vital Stewardship program that David introduced. And oh, by the way, we are in the Gospel of Mark and dealing with the concept of love. That's at least 3 totally different topics!

Or are they?

For a few minutes this morning I want to talk about unknown people. These are the people who are the core of all we do and all we are:

These are the individuals and these are the families that rely on Nativitas for a hot meal, for food to supplement what they have to feed a family at home, or for simply a place to be, someplace out of the weather, where they will be welcome.

When I worked with the Council of Churches, I knew these folks: one had just lost a job, one had an injury that outlasted their medical leave, one had a turn of very bad luck, one was a family of working poor trying to feed their family, one was a lost soul who simply longed for a place, any place, that would not chase him away. I knew them but could never name them.

These are the individuals and these are the families who have supported this congregation for almost 100 years, giving of their time, their talents and their resources.

After many, many years in church work, I know these folks. For some, giving was easy. For others, even small financial contributions were difficult. But they gave so that we would have a congregation today, even as we give, so there will be a congregation for those here today and yet to come. I know them but could never name those who made it financially possible to bring this congregation forward for one hundred years any more than I could name those who will arrive after I have left and who will hold in trust this place of God for others yet to come.

However, if you think about it, even the Gospel itself is largely driven by unknown people. We know something about their actions, but rarely know their names...much like the folks who are assisted by Nativitas, or those who have made IPC possible.

Some of these unknown and unnamed individuals of the Gospel seem so insignificant and their deeds and words seem so miniscule. Yet they set in motion an incredible spirit-driven domino effect that causes the world to be changed right before our very eyes.

Think of the unnamed visitors from the east who came first to spy on – and ultimately to worship and offer gifts to - the newborn baby Jesus.

Or what about the little boy who only had a small bag lunch to offer Jesus and whose mere five loaves and two fish became enough to feed a crowd of five thousand.

Or what about the woman who gave the best she had to Jesus – a jar of expensive ointment that she used to anoint Jesus' feet – an act that touched Jesus at the deepest level.

What do all of these people have in common? Extravagant generosity. A kind of sacrifice and persistence that is remarkable not only for its impact but also because of the anonymous nature of its origin. We don't know WHO they were, but we know how they impacted our faith. Our story today from Mark 12 is a perfect example.

Imagine the scene: Jesus was at the Temple one day, people watching and with people watching Him. He focused squarely on the part of the Temple called the treasury, where people brought their offerings in support to the Temple. The donors were coming, and many rich people were putting in large sums.

You can almost imagine the scene; a line of people, each one dressed in fine linens, adorned with expensive jewelry. Each one is carrying a bag of gold coins, or a large box of copper and silver, or a satchel full of jewelry and gems. Each one walked up to make their donations.

Now the donations went into great, metal vessels called trumpets. With a long neck and a big, flaring opening, these metal trumpets would ring with the sounds of the donations striking their sides on the way in. You can almost imagine the rushing, ringing sounds of an avalanche of coin pouring in from bag after bag, crate after crate into an ever-bulging treasury.

This was show time for the rich; a place to see and to be seen. Many rich people put in large, loud sums. There may have even been a smattering of applause from the gawking onlookers.

But something else caught Jesus' attention. Not a rich person, but a poor widow. Maybe it was the way she was dressed. Maybe it was the look on her face. But something about her communicated to Jesus that she was not like those other people. She was poor, alone, and left with little. Her contribution to the treasury barely bade a clink, let alone an avalanche.

She pulled out two, tiny copper coins. Together they were worth about a penny. She walked up and dropped her two coins into the treasury.

I think it safe to say, there wasn't any applause. I'm pretty sure nobody turned their heads. But this unnamed woman, unknown to the world, caught the attention of the Son of God. Jesus turned and said to His disciples, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury."

Hang on! You don't have to work for one of the big accounting firms here in Brussels to figure out that Jesus made a mistake! But He goes on to say, "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"?

Now we get to the heart of the matter! The widow's offering DID make a bigger difference than the offerings of the wealthy. No, not a bigger difference in the finances of the temple. It didn't buy more candles or incense. But it DID make a bigger difference – in the life and heart of the giver.

When the wealthy gave their sums, they didn't miss it. They had plenty left over, to live their fast lives, to wear their fine clothes, and to take their big vacations. They didn't have to give up any luxuries, sacrifice any ambitions; their offerings made no difference to them at all.

Well, in fairness, there was likely the one fellow who made his contribution for show, maybe even stretched the budget a bit, just so people would marvel at him, approve of his generosity or perhaps win himself the attention of the wealthy patron or client he wanted. Of course, that wasn't really giving to the Temple, that was advertising.

But for the rest, the offering made no difference to them at all.

Not so for the widow. The moment she decided to hear her coins plunk into the coffer she knew she would feel the effects of that for a very long time. She would have to give up some bit of her life or wait until the next time she had money to do something for herself. She would, as a result of her gift, have to do some serious reprioritizing, reassessing of her commitment to God.

And she would have to do it soon.

However, she knew she was doing the right thing, because she recognized that her offering was a reflection of her commitment to God. Somehow, the money she left in the box that day was emblematic of her love for God, her gratitude for God's blessings, and her desire to see the work of God continued in her community.

Sue and I made the decision years ago to strive to become "tithers", that is, to give a minimum of 10% of our income to Church and Mission. We haven't always made it, but we have always worked towards it. Sometimes, it meant driving older cars or taking camping holidays rather than buying new rides and staying in nice hotels.

It meant that my belt has held in a LOT more chicken than it ever has steak!
And our girls grew up being “frugalists” rather than fashionistas.

And I wouldn't change it for the world!

Even today, as we prepare for retirement and ALL the advice we receive tells us time and time again, “save ALL your money for You”, we tithe.

Now, I don't share that out of since of “sainthood” or “martyrdom”; anything but! We have been blessed beyond measure, how could we possibly want for anything? Yes, there have been times when we have known our gift was going to make for a financially tight month. Yes, there are LOTS of other things we could have done with that money.

But we CHOSE to follow the Gospel teachings. We CHOSE to make the Church and her Missions our priority. We CHOSE to follow Jesus. Sometimes we've done well; sometimes, not so good. But we have always and will always, try.

Not as much for the church, as for us.

Remember the widow? She gave sacrificially, but she gave joyfully. In return, her little two-mite gift would impact her forever.

Jesus called her gift greater because it made a bigger difference in her life and was a better indication of the sincerity of her commitment than any of the other gifts from any of the wealthy patrons.

Her gift of Love. The GREATEST Gift.