

# *Ascension Lutheran Church*

*Pastor Godkin's Sermon for the week of November 8, 2009*

## Gratitude Follows Grace (Mark 12:28-44)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen. The text for today's homily is from the twelfth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Mark. Our Lord says to us:

"Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. <sup>42</sup>But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, 'I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.'"

This is the Word of God.

Dear friends in Christ, This past summer was a wet one. In fact it was one of the rainiest summers in recent memory. And yet there were not many thunderstorms. Thunder and lightning were not really on the radar. When you were a kid and you saw some lightning what did you do? Sometimes if we wanted to know how far away the lightning was we might have counted...one thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three...If you heard the thunder strike five seconds after the lightning you knew the storm was a mile away. That's how long the sound waves took to travel. And if you heard thunder at only something like one second or at the same time as the lightning you knew it was time to take cover, you knew the storm was at your doorstep. Thunder and lightning go together.

The twentieth century theologian Karl Barth once said that "Grace evokes gratitude like the voice of an echo". Gratitude follows grace like thunder follows lightning. In the same way that we can expect to hear thunder after seeing lightning we can expect to see gratitude in ourselves and in other Christians when we comprehend the grace that our Lord and God has given to us in Jesus Christ.

The widow who gave her two cents worth into the offering plate understood this grace of God. Because she trusted and understood all that God had done for her she was willing to give everything she had to live on. Jesus said that, "Out of her poverty she put in everything she had, all she had to live on." Her two pennies of gratitude followed the grace she knew she had received from God just like thunder follows lightning.

Jesus saw in this poor widow something the rest of the world did not see. He saw someone whose heart was close to God. While other people gave much larger amounts in terms of monetary value this woman gave everything she had to live on.

Shortly before this happened one of the teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Which of the commandments is the greatest?" Jesus said the most important one is this, "To love the

Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength is the greatest commandment and the second is to love your neighbour as yourself.” Now the teacher of the law then responded, “Well said teacher, these commands are more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” Jesus then told the man, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

The widow here realized that everything she had belonged to God; her water, her food, the air she breathed, she saw that even the two small coins were God’s gifts to her. She wanted to love the Lord with all her heart, her soul, her mind, her strength, her being. And she became an example of someone whose gratitude followed grace.

The poor widowed woman understood that all the things we have belong to God and we are simply managers of these things. So how much should we give to God? Or worse yet how much do we have to give to the God? Does God deserve only our leftover time, our leftover treasures? Or does He deserve the very best? The answer is: we are free to give everything to God. We are free to use all the resources God has blessed us with for His glory and for our neighbour’s good.

The food we eat, the water we drink, the air we are breathing right now, the money in our purses and wallets; these all belong to God essentially. God wants everything we say, and everything we think and do, all our attitudes and actions to be for His glory – as a response to the love He has showered on us in Christ, as an ‘Amen’ to the life we have in Him.

There is a tendency to think that somehow we are responsible for building our church, that somehow by our wisdom and our frugality and our toil we sustain it. But the truth is God does not need us to run His church. As Psalm 127 says, “Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labour in vain.” We must not forget that Jesus Christ is the centre of the Church. His grace and mercy are what sustain us. And in His rich and grace He continually works to build us up by the Word and Sacraments that He freely offers and gives to us.

For our very lives we owe everything back to God. He simply wants us to respond with faithfulness back to Him. Our time, our talents, and treasures - we are to use them all in His service in gratitude for His all surpassing service to us. After all, is there really anything more precious than the forgiveness of sins and eternal life with our Saviour in His heavenly Kingdom?

Friends, there is more than meets the eye in this passage today. Things are not what they seem; they are not what we expect. When Jesus criticized the Scribes and Pharisees it is not like the people were saying, “Yeah Jesus you give it to those Pharisees!” Rather, the Pharisees were largely respected and admired by the people. To some of the people what Jesus said against the religious leaders likely came as a shock.

He took what they valued most and turned it on its head. The Pharisees loved their status – the best seats and places of honour – they loved to make a show of their

religiosity with their obsession with simply the outward form of things. They had this religious status and yet they had forgotten what is at the heart of God – which is the widow and the orphans, they had forgotten about mercy for the poor and the neglected, and they had lost concern for the spiritually lost of this world.

We too are tempted by these things today. If we are more concerned with the niceties of ceremony than the content of the message of Scripture then our religion has lost its soul. If we are more concerned with our personal honour and status than with the message of the Gospel then our religion is a sham. This truly is one of the dangers of the church today and it is something we are all guilty of at times.

Business models and success dominate the church today. Who are the greatest members? Who do the most? It is not necessarily the greatest givers. The woman gave everything she had and loved the Lord with her whole heart – she's a lot closer than the rich people. We are talking about fundamentally different standards here. True importance in God's eyes does not come from status and what we think is important. Those who are unimportant to men are important to God. Those who have no status in the eyes of men have great status in the eyes of God.

No, those who are great in God's eyes are those who see themselves as lowly and weak and who look to Jesus and His atoning sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins, who look to Him to guide them in everything and seek to live in a way that thoughtfully responds to His grace. Yes, God looks with favour on those who trust Jesus to lift them up by His mercy and grace now and ultimately on the Last Day.

I cannot tie together what the widow did to what Jesus has done for us any better than the hymn writer does in the fourth verse of one of the communion hymns today, "At last He brought His offering and laid it on the tree. There gave Himself, His life, His love for all humanity." May we in light of His grace to us live out our lives with gratitude for that grace just as thunder follows lightning. Amen. The peace of God that surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.