

1 Kings 17:8-16, Psalm 146, Hebrews 9:24-28, Mark 12:38-44

3. 3. !

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was  
and Who is to come. † Amen.

Then he called his disciples and said to them, "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.

--Mark 12:43,44

**I**n the Lutheran synod in which I served previously, it was incumbent upon all pastors to personally read the giving record of each member of the congregation. It was anticipated that there would be tremendous personal resistance to this practice on the part of pastors, not no

mention grumbling on the part of congregations. Why? That is simply because money is more private and more important to us Americans than anything else. It is more important and more private than politics, which we may discuss as a pass time, or religion, which few of those who practice it try to keep secret, or love, or marriage or sex. Money is that by which, for which and from which we live, for the most part, and we do not wish anyone prying into our possession of it or our use of it. The act of doing so is considered a social taboo, making the IRS and other tax-collecting agencies in some sense as much pariahs today as they were in Jesus' day. It felt, as we say in the vernacular, 'yucky' to read the giving record of the congregation, and I think I only brought myself to do that in two of the four years I served under regular call to a congregation of the New Jersey Synod. I did it only

because I knew that the assistant to the bishop would ask me if I had done, and that she was as firm about that as she was persistent. I hear that, as Lutheran Bishop of New England, she still is. It is a relief to serve in this Synod in which, for the most part, even pledging is not discussed.

Reading the parish giving record had the desired effect on me. I could no longer ignore the need for stewardship education and discipline in the congregation. It helped me to see some of the chief naysayers, those experts on why any new idea will not work, in perspective as I noticed the astonishingly low level of giving in some of their cases, actually in *all* of them. It helped me to appreciate the stalwart support of the more than several who, it turned out, were as generous with their money as they were with their time. And, in one case, reading the giving record both astonished and humbled me. That was

because the largest weekly financial contributor in the congregation in gross figures was a housekeeper.

Her name is Elsa. You can see a cross-stitched picture of Our Lord on the Cross which she made for me, now hanging in the pastor's study here. She is a life-long Lutheran from Guatemala—Yes, our foreign missions have reaped a bountiful harvest! Her life has been anything but easy and has brought with it more than the usual burden of loss and worry. She had lived in our neighborhood for several years before her son discovered little Trinity Lutheran Church and brought his mother with him the next Sunday. She had been worshipping in Manhattan, where she worked everyday, but now Sunday could be a day of true rest for her in the worship of her Lord. Though she was well paid by the prominent family who had employed her for years, I knew that the amount of her contributions must

surely exceed a tithe of her before-tax income. I had read a story recently about a mega-church in Florida that had encouraged people through its radio ministry to mortgage their homes in order to support the church, only, when these families became destitute through unemployment and the bank foreclosed on their mortgage, the televangelist and his incorporated ministry seemed unconcerned.

*I was concerned* that Elsa was meeting her own needs and those of her sons, one living with her and one in Ohio, I asked her about this. She assured me that she had plenty for her needs and a few of her wants. God had been so good to her throughout her life, and now more than ever in providing a church at her doorstep, how could she not pass on to the Church in thanksgiving to God the extra kindnesses of her employers who took every opportunity to show their appreciation for her devotion?

Elsa finally silenced my concern with a smile. Her giving was her joy, and it was her gift to God of herself.

The widow in today's Gospel was in a different situation from my dear sister in Christ, Elsa. She had perhaps come to the very end of her means in a society that gave lip-service to the care of widows and orphans. Her last act, as far as she knew, would be to glorify God with her last fraction of her last coin. My personal *midrash* on this text would be that Jesus instructed Judas, the treasurer of the Disciples, to give the poor woman some help, or that God would work a miracle for her as He did for the widow who ministered to Elijah. I feel as though I have in some sense met the widow in today's Gospel. I have certainly met her faith and her joy.

Blessed Mother Theresa of Calcutta is another face and name that comes to mind as I read this Gospel

text. In a part of the world where poverty and illness are visible on such a massive scale that any effort to alleviate it might seem hopeless, Mother Theresa and her Daughters of Charity chose to hope in Christ, to do, as she put it, "something beautiful for God." Thanks be to God, there are many Christian ministries that do this, including World Vision from which we look forward to hearing on Christ the King Sunday. Few Christian aid organizations, including our own Lutheran World Relief, have so radically consecrated themselves to the ones they serve as have the Daughters of Charity. Now, years after the frail person of their foundress has been received into her heavenly Father's eternal arms of mercy, the Daughters of Charity are moved by the Holy Spirit to hold the dying in their arms on the streets of Calcutta and in hospices for those dying from the

effects of poverty or AIDS the world over, giving *all* of themselves to do 'something beautiful for God.'

Out of what do we draw our gifts of thanksgiving to God who has blessed us? Do we give out of what we have, out of our very confidential treasury of money and possessions, or do we worship God and magnify God in the midst of the congregation by consecrating and giving our *selves*? To put the question differently, and perhaps to be a little less 'preachy,' how are *we* moved to love and to glorify the One Who loves *us* with His whole being, who loves us to the point of surrendering all He has a right to on the Cross? How and with what gifts shall we love Him while we are still able? How much do we desire to see the mission of His Church *and* the good done by other institutions furthered through our labor and our

wealth? Above all, what do we wish to show Christ on the ledger of our hearts which He alone will read?

Let it be something beautiful for God! ✠ Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. ✠ Amen.

**S.D.G.!**