

Giving Out of Our Poverty
(Mark 12:38-44)

According to the Associated Press, in October of 1994, Harvard School of Law announced that it had received the largest cash gift ever given to a law school. The gift was a cool thirteen million dollars. The donors were Gustave and Rita Hauser. While the size of the gift was impressive, it was the motive behind the gift that attracted the most attention.

What could inspire such generosity? Would you believe it was romance and gratitude? It seems that Rita and Gustave met in 1955 while attending law school. The day after final exams in 1956, they were married. Both went on to become quite successful in life, as well as in business.

What is even more interesting in this story is the fact that Gustave never practiced law. His love and deep gratitude for Harvard School of Law was not inspired by its status as an educator of the world's finest legal minds. No, he was inspired by Harvard's role as a "matchmaker." Gustave Hauser truly believed that Harvard played a unique role in uniting him with Rita back in 1955.

When we are given much and are mature enough to be grateful – no matter what motives our gratitude – we naturally want to give much. It's natural for us to have a deep desire to give out of love. God gave us Jesus Christ, the greatest gift imaginable. God too was motivated to give out of love – love for us. And God has given us much. It's no wonder then, that we too should find great joy in giving back to God our greatest gift of gratitude: our time,

energy, talent and our money. We owe God everything. Please pray with me.

And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our grateful hearts be pleasing to you, O God, the Giver of all Life, who gives to us the most priceless gift. Open our hearts and minds to the scripture read and the word proclaimed so that we might give fully of ourselves. In the name of Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

Webster's College Dictionary defines the term *stewardship* as "... the act of managing another person's property or financial affairs; acting as an agent of another person or persons." According to the Book of Genesis, we are charged with managing Creation which can be said to be "God's property and financial affairs." We are called to be God's agents, to administer with loving care all that God has created and given to us. We have been entrusted with an awesome responsibility. Our response must be a solid commitment to be good stewards.

As Christians, we are also entrusted with another awesome responsibility as stewards – administering with loving care the Church of Jesus Christ. God loves us so much that God gives to us Jesus Christ as the ultimate sacrifice – God's only son. And Jesus gave us the Church.

Like Gustave and Rita Hauser, good stewards are cheerful givers who

give out of a powerful sense of gratitude – out of love. Good stewards give according to that which they have received, not according to their ability to give back. In the awesome gift of Jesus Christ we have received much. How could we ever match that gift?

In the gospel lesson this morning, Jesus is with the disciples in the temple. The setting is that particular place within the temple where people come to pay their temple taxes and make freewill offerings. Jesus and the disciples sit there for some time and watch person after person come forward – some depositing large sums of money.

Then, a little old woman – a widow we are told – approaches the depository. Her tattered robe is only one outward sign of her poverty. She is stooped and weather-worn from gleaning the edges of the grain fields – the only way a poor Hebrew widow can make a living. Slowly, she approaches one of the depositories – a large metal vessel, recently emptied of its bounty by one of the temple priests.

With shaky hands she opens a small, thread-bare cloth purse and confidently empties the contents into the vessel. Clink! Clink! Two small copper coins echo throughout the temple treasury as they fall to the bottom of the empty metal bowl. Clink! Clink! The sound of the coins dropping reveals the meagerness of her gift. All the money in the world – all of her worldly resources we are told she has placed into the treasury of the temple.

Sensing a teaching moment, Jesus seizes the opportunity. He says to the disciples, “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 has given out of her poverty, putting in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

This poor widow with her two copper coins has been the poster child for church stewardship campaigns for years. The idea of giving out of our poverty – rather than out of our abundance – is one of the cornerstones of stewardship in the church. Giving out of poverty has also become the image of the cheerful giver giving in full measure according to what we have received from God in the gift of Christ Jesus, not according to our ability to give!

Even though Mark doesn't specifically cast an image of this poor woman as being cheerful, it's safe for us to assume that she is not giving out of bitterness. She is giving out of love – her deep and abiding love of God.

Whenever I talk about the concept of being a cheerful giver I am often reminded of the chiropractor in Tampa Bay who had paid alimony to his former wife for a long, long time. When he finally came to his last payment of \$182 he didn't want to just send the money; he wanted to send a message as well. So in large scale he sketched a check on the back of a pinstripe shirt. On the memo line of his “shirt-check” he wrote, “Here it is – the shirt of my back!” Surprisingly, as the story is told, the bank actually cashed that check. A funny story, perhaps, but when there is no love, giving leads only to bitterness and cynicism.

We desire to be cheerful givers, giving according to that matchless gift of Christ Jesus that we have received out of God's love for us. It's like that bank card commercial says, you know, the one that goes something like this:

Five box seats at a Cubs game,
\$154 ...

Three souvenir ball caps, \$63 ...

An afternoon with the family,
priceless.

Perhaps that commercial makes
more sense to us as Christians if it were
to go more like this:

A monthly tithe of my salary, \$500 ...

A donation to the food pantry, \$50 ...

The Resurrection, priceless.

I'll bet that's one commercial we'll
never see on ABC! The gift we have
received from God in Christ Jesus is
priceless. There is no way we could
ever give back enough to cover the
price that has been paid for our
salvation. But this doesn't mean that we
shouldn't strive to give of ourselves to
the fullest – out of our poverty and not
out of our abundance.

When we joined the United
Methodist Church or the United Church
of Christ we became a part of a
connection or communion with God.
Our motive for joining was to be better
connected with God. And why do we
desire this connection? We are
motivated out of our love for God and
our desire to give back to God some
small portion of that which we have
received from God.

When we joined the church we
also took some vows. I'm thinking of the
one that most directly relates to
stewardship. Do you remember what
we all agreed to do? We agreed to
"faithfully participate in the ministries of
the church with our prayers, our

presence, our gifts, service, and our
witness."

These are the foundational
elements that are essential to good
stewardship. The first is prayer. Each
of us is called to faithfully pray for the
church daily, for our church family, for
our ministries, for the poor and the sick,
for our enemies, for those who have not
heard the gospel message, even for the
pastor! Prayer is biblical. Jesus taught
us how to pray and what to say. Paul
taught us to do it without ceasing. Daily
prayer is one foundational element of
stewardship.

The second element is our
presence in the church. This means
that we must faithfully attend and
participate in worship at least once a
week, if not more frequently, to
participate in the life of the church.
Praising God with enthusiasm as a
cheerful worshipper is one way we give
back some of that priceless gift we have
all received.

The third foundational element of
good stewardship is the faithful giving of
our financial gifts to God. This is the
element that is embraced in Mark's story
of the poor widow in the temple. Like
the widow we are called to give
according to that priceless gift – out of
our poverty, out of our love for God –
and not just as we are occasionally able.
The early church knew what this
element meant as new Christians sold
off their property and gave it to the
church to be distributed according to the
needs of all the people. Giving out of
our poverty rather than out of our
abundance.

The fourth element of good
stewardship is our faithful service to
God and Christ's holy church. Just as
we are called to give of our financial
resources out of our poverty, so it is that

we are also called to give of our time out of its scarcity in our daily lives. We are all busy, no doubt. Busyness is a symbol of our contemporary western culture. The poverty of our time is what makes serving all the more important to being a good steward and a cheerful giver.

The last but not the least of our foundational elements of stewardship is our witness. By telling others about how God in Jesus Christ is working in our lives we can make God real for others who have not experienced God in a powerful way.

All five foundational elements are necessary all the time: faithfulness to prayer, presence, giving of our gifts, service, and our personal witness. The vows we all took when we joined the church didn't have any "ors" in between. It's prayers and presence and gifts and service and witness, not prayers or presence or gifts or service or witness. We just can't be good stewards unless we are faithfully practicing all five foundational elements together. They are all interrelated and connected to our responsibility to be stewards of God's Creation. These elements define who we are as a spiritual people – as children of God.

I invite you now to join with me in renewing our covenant to be good stewards of God's Creation and Christ's holy church.

We give thanks for all that God has given to us. We renew our covenant to faithfully participate in the ministries of the church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness, that in every measure we give out of love and gratitude according to the greatness of our blessings

and not according to our ability to give, that in our giving God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.

The God of all grace, who has called us to eternal glory in Christ, establish you and strengthen you by the power of the Holy Spirit, that you may live in grace and peace. Amen.