

**THE FREEDOM TO BE GENEROUS**  
James S. Currie

At first appearance the two stories we read in Mark's Gospel today seem to be unrelated. The one has to do with Jesus teaching in the temple to beware of the hypocrisy of some scribes, that is, some Jewish officials, who are officious and pretentious, demanding attention and respect and offering long prayers while, at the same time, taking advantage of the weaker ones in society. The second story is the familiar one of Jesus sitting with his disciples outside the temple watching as folks bring their offering to the temple treasury. He notes that some rich people put in large amounts of money. Then, of course, they see a widow who with two copper coins, which is apparently all that she has, put them both in the treasury.

We need to be clear about what these two stories are *not* about. The first story is not about Judaism or Jewish practices, and the second story is not about rich people and poor people. These two stories, which are the last ones in Jesus' public ministry and before the passion narrative, have to do with Jesus' intolerance for hypocrisy and the full and complete commitment that is demanded in his call to discipleship.

Eugene Peterson maintains that nothing angered Jesus more than hypocrisy. Peterson writes: "Jesus unfailingly approached the everyday sort of sinners who robbed, broke the sabbath, engaged in prostitution, and even murdered, with inviting compassion. Hypocrites got nothing but His denunciation" (*Living with The Message*, pp. 198-199). The phrase from last week's sermon that most people seem to remember

was “we are all recovering hypocrites.” I think that’s true, and the good news is that as long as we are aware of that, there’s a certain humility and freedom that come with that awareness.

Jesus is clear about the cost of discipleship. There’s no cheap way around it. The cost is real. It demands all that we have. It demands our lives. Anyone who follows Jesus is “all in”, as we said a few weeks ago. Last week we saw how the church at Philippi was so eager to contribute to the church in Jerusalem that they begged for the privilege of contributing, even though, materially, they were in the same economic class as that widow at the temple treasury in Jerusalem. But Paul reminds us that “they first gave themselves to the Lord”.

So, what difference does that make? Poor is poor. The rich still gave more money to the temple treasury than that poor widow. The difference is the joy and the freedom that come with being able to give anything and everything in the service of Jesus Christ. The difference is that there is short-sightedness and hypocrisy involved, in saying, “Well, at least I gave something.” The difference is in living with the attitude that “I get to give what I have”, not “What must I give to satisfy my conscience?”

Over the past several weeks the Minute for Mission each week has been testimonies given by church members on what difference this congregation has made in their lives. We have heard from those who have been here only a few years and from those who have been a part of this church all of their lives. We have heard about the various ministries this church is, and has been, involved in. We have celebrated 75 years of ministry in Pasadena. None of that has been because anyone gets a star in their crown. None of that has been because people expect anything in return. None of

that has been because people feel like they “have to” do it. All of it has been because people have experienced God’s grace and acceptance and, in doing so, feel called by God to give themselves to God.

It’s not difficult to point to persons even in this congregation today who live that way every day, whether it’s sitting with someone before, during, and after surgery -- not out of some sense of obligation, but simply because it brings comfort to the patient -- or singing in the choir or playing in the bell choir -- not because they have to, but because music has a way of bringing joy to them -- or working in the church’s garden -- not because they have to do it, but because they say they feel closest to God doing that. There’s also teaching Sunday school, serving as an elder or a deacon, being part of Presbyterian Women or Presbyterian Men, contributing to VBS or the youth group or any of the other activities of the life of this church. Or maybe it’s doing something outside the church: participating in the community because they think it’s important and they enjoy doing it, or having a vocation that brings delight and satisfaction to them. Or perhaps a person is retired and volunteers here at the church in any of a number of activities, whether it’s answering the phone at the front desk or helping out at the Baywood Crossing ministry or participating in Young at Heart or the Gathering Place. And the list goes on and on and on.

Someone has said that these two stories that we read today -- the one about Jesus warning against the hypocrisy of the scribes and the one about the widow’s contribution to the temple treasury -- are an important part of Mark’s answer to the question, “Who is Jesus Christ?” (Lamar Williamson, Jr. *Mark*, p. 235). How do you think these two stories address that question?

Perhaps, at least in part, this Jesus is one who does not suffer hypocrites gladly. He calls us to an honest appraisal of ourselves and our own need for God's grace and mercy, or, as Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans, that we are not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think (12:3). He demands the kind of genuine authenticity that David offered in his plea for grace and forgiveness in Psalm 51: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" (vv. 1,10).

But these stories also point to who Jesus is in that, by giving our whole selves to him, we discover the freedom of generosity, the freedom of giving without thinking of the cost. The difference between the rich people giving to the temple treasury and the poor widow who gave to the treasury is not how much they gave. Rather, the difference lies in the spirit with which they gave. The wealthy may have given what they gave either out of obligation or because they might not miss what they gave. The widow gave what she gave without thinking of the cost. She gave out of joy and gratitude.

As mentioned earlier, we should not lose sight of the fact that these two stories conclude Jesus' public ministry as Mark reports it. Chapter 13 follows with Jesus' warning about the destruction of the temple and of imminent persecution. This is important because from now on we follow Jesus as the story of his passion unfolds: his last supper with the disciples, his betrayal, arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. He himself lives out what he has taught his disciples. His honesty before God and faithfulness to God become evident to the disciples. The cost of discipleship is indeed

costly because it demands our whole selves, but it is joyful also because we are “all in” and we belong to him who never deserts us and from whose love nothing can separate us.

Today is Dedication Sunday. While we dedicate our pledges for support of this church in 2016, I hope that two things will also happen. First, I hope that we will understand that we dedicate not only our pledges and our offerings, but that we dedicate, or re-dedicate, our whole selves to the life God has given us and to which God calls us, a life of following Jesus. And second, I hope that whatever we pledge and give to the God through the life of this church is pledged and given out of a spirit of joy and gratitude, not out of some sense of obligation or because we won't miss it. God demands our whole selves. When we give ourselves completely, we discover the freedom of giving generously and graciously.

The opening hymn today (#694) has a refrain is taken to be the motto John Calvin: “sincerely and completely I offer you my heart.” In offering our hearts, Calvin says, we offer God all that we have and all that we are.

Thanks be to God for the opportunity we have to be a part of this part of God's kingdom and to live lives of costly and joyful discipleship.