

James 1:16-18

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers and sisters. Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave birth to us by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

Luke 20:45-21:6 (NRSV)

[This reading from Luke takes place during Holy Week. On Monday, Jesus returns to the temple to find the court of the Gentiles full of traders and money changers making a large profit from the offerings of the people. Jesus angrily drives them out and overturns their benches and tables. On Tuesday afternoon, Jesus stands on the Mount of Olives overlooking Jerusalem, and begins teaching in parables, warning the people against the rich leaders and predicting future events.]

⁴⁵ In the hearing of all the people he said to the disciples, ⁴⁶ “Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes and who love respectful greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. ⁴⁷ They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.” ²¹ He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; ² he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. ³ He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them, ⁴ for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.”

⁵ When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, ⁶ “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.

By the time Jesus was born, Herod the Great had put the finishing touches on the new Second Temple in Jerusalem -- one of many monuments to his own wealth and power in Judea. It was magnificent, and the center of spiritual and community life for all Jews.

Thirty years later, wealthy Jews enjoy their status and influence around the Temple, and seem to ignore the reality that they, and all they have accomplished, will soon dry up and wither like the grass under a scorching sun! In their minds, the temple is an extension of their wealth. Their great pride prevents them from considering those who are struggling to eat and keep shelter over their heads. Their actions belie the Great Commandment, to love God above self and to love one’s neighbor; for rather than protecting the poor, they take advantage of them by dishonest means, failing to feed or help the widows and orphans, the basic expectation of any good society. Some of their great wealth reaches the temple tax system, but they have so much more remaining in their treasury accounts. Yes, they are grateful – that they are superior and not like the poor. They make no move to help the plight of the powerless.

The widow’s contribution of two copper coins is more meaningful in Jesus’ eyes, for she gives all she has. Jesus tells us nothing about her; but as a devout Jewish woman who has come dutifully to the Temple to pay her tax, she probably knows well the story of the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings:17, who worked by the grace of God to provide a destitute widow with oil and flour so that she and her son had enough to eat; and later, to save her son from death. The woman in our Bible text today is not looking for credit or recognition for her gift, but is responding from her heart, in full trust that

God will also provide and care for her.

Jesus, in the hearing of all the people standing by, teaches his disciples that leadership in ministry is to be from the heart, not for the pride of achievement and gain. He tells his disciples to be faithful to God in their stewardship, acknowledging that all their gifts and talents are from the Lord and not themselves.

The difference in the two perspectives is this: The widow responds with thankfulness for the grace of God. The unscrupulous leaders and scribes respond with pomp and ceremony, enjoying the honor and respect given to them, yet showing disdain toward others. Jesus then warns his disciples that the beautiful temple that is the pride of all Jerusalem will topple to the ground in days to come. All the wealth being shown among its people and in its courts today will vanish tomorrow.

There is an old saying, “I wouldn’t give two cents” for this or that, such as an opinion or a cheap bauble. Or the saying is often revised to say, “This is just my two cents,” as though the opinion isn’t worth much. But the widow’s “two cents” on this day is everything to her. From where does her overwhelming gratitude come?

Very possibly, she is grateful for Life – the gift of Life itself, in all its glory. From the first God-breathed act at Creation to our last breath, we are offered the possibilities of a life well-lived and experienced with joy. We see God’s glory in the sunrise as it appears each morning over the Organ Mountains; a NEW day, each and every day – a new opportunity to revel in the intricate beauty and design of our created world – a world that has been given by the grace of God for his beloved creatures; and that creation is ours, to care for and cherish. The gift of Life has no price; we ourselves cannot buy it at any price – not two cents, not one dollar, millions or billions, or even trillions. Life is Priceless. And above and beyond life itself, God gifted us before we were born with intangible gifts and talents to share with others in our society:

our intellect, our curiosity, our physical strength, our capacity to love and care for each other, our ability to use our gifts for the good of all.

The struggles of life are evident as we contemplate this faithful widow with no visible means of support. Why is she willing to give all she has? Could it be that she is overwhelmed with gratitude even with her struggles, heartache, and uncertainty? Perhaps she fully trusts that God will provide her next meal by way of friends, neighbors, or family member. We don’t know, since Jesus doesn’t elaborate. Perhaps he leaves her circumstances unexplained so we can insert our own. The widow’s response to God is profoundly genuine. She has shown trust in God’s generous love and the life he has given her. Her two cents is a token of her faith, which to God is priceless.

About 16 years ago, a young PhD student and his wife came to our church. Olivier and Prisca Heubo lived in a very small apartment on a meager graduate assistant’s salary, which they managed to share with their families back home in Cameroon. They soon were overjoyed with the arrival of their first child, in 2007. Completely exhilarated by their gift of a son, they invited members of the church to a birthday party the day Prisca came home from the hospital! Friends from NMSU and our church family poured into the tiny house to celebrate, bringing delicious food which the Africans always contribute so generously. The kitchen counters, stovetop, and table were completely covered with dishes, and even more were warming in the oven.

Between the living area and the 2 bedrooms and bathroom was a small square of free space about the size of an office cubicle. Olivier shut the three doors to create more wall area and filled the space with folding chairs that lined the walls. He called the space his “back porch” and invited his friends who were also international students, to join him there, to enjoy a beer and celebrate with him the joy a new child brings. The rest of us were happy to enjoy the new mother and baby and take turns holding and admiring him.

As I walked past the “back porch” a second time on the way to the kitchen, I overheard Olivier say to his friends, “Some Americans just like to count their money!” I smiled; I was not offended by Olivier’s observation, for I knew there is truth in it; that counting our money has been a very human trait in all cultures through the centuries. Like the religious leaders who devoured widows’ houses during Jesus’s day, so we all must consider whether we, also, are capable of rationalizing that the more we have, the more we need. There was so much happiness in the tiny home that night, that Prisca and Olivier and all their guests couldn’t have felt more rich.

All of us were incredibly blessed to be there together to celebrate, sharing the wonder of God’s gifts of New Life, Harvest, Love, and Joy, in a space of no more than 200-300 square feet. The Heubo’s story is a living testament to the power of God’s overwhelming grace;

and the human response of gratitude--

a response to sincere belief and trust in God,

giving one's all to one's community in dedicated service
despite all that may be happening around us.

Gratitude, evidently, is contagious. It was spread from heart to heart that evening

But there still remains the mysteries of pain, loss, and injustice. We are justified to mourn these indignities, those things that work against joy, love, and peace. Gratitude does not take pain away. Gratefulness is no preventive cure against loss, disappointment, and pain. Yet, the widow's story helps us to look for ways for gratitude to enfold the pain in a greater good.

To be grateful for the good things that happen in our lives is easy, but to be grateful for all of our lives – the good as well as the bad, the moments of joy as well as the moments of sorrow, the successes as well as the failures, the rewards as well as the rejections— that requires hard spiritual work. Still, we are only truly grateful people when we can say thank you to all that has brought us to the present moment. As long as we keep dividing our lives between events and people we would like to remember and those we would rather forget, we cannot claim the fullness of our beings as a gift of God to be grateful for.¹

Henri Nouwen¹

Acts of gratitude provide an opportunity to pay it forward as we work together and thrive. The original meaning of the Latin word, *gratus*, meant a transactional type of giving; giving to someone in order to get something in return. Emotional gratitude is quite different, and describes the gift given by the widow. She gave freely, with no expectation of being rewarded in any way. She gave a part of herself with meaning attached to it. When we want to do it, we are rewarded with a feeling of well-being and thankfulness that we were able to do it; and we instill the gift of generosity in the receiver, who then shares with another, thus looking toward the future and something new about which to be thankful.

During times of great sorrow or stress, it may be very difficult to find things for which we can be thankful; but it has been proven that the discipline of practicing gratitude is enormously good for the soul. It is not easy to list our blessings when we are feeling down; but keeping a daily gratitude journal to reflect on God's gifts inspires us to come out of ourselves – out of our personal grief and disappointments, to form a daily prayer habit of reflecting on our joys rather than our sorrows, and to thank God for the miracle of life we have been given.

Gratitude isn't about passive reflection; it's about building resilience. It's not about being thankful for things that have already occurred and, thus, can't be changed; it's about ensuring the benefits of what comes next. It's about making sure that tomorrow, and the day after, you will have something to be grateful for.

In any church, it is interesting to note that those who are most grateful for the gifts they have received are the ones who serve wholeheartedly with energy, gladness, and commitment to offer their own gifts to others. They give time and talents generously, hoping that their contributions will be meaningful to another person. Each token of love brought to the Heubo household was individually a part of something overwhelmingly significant that left the new parents feeling treasured and nurtured as they began their new adventure as a family.

LIFE is the greatest gift of all, and it is most beautiful when shared.

These unforgettable memories with others in the family of God are to be shared so that we might better understand what our own life is about – which is not necessarily about counting money, but weighing the gifts God brings to our lives in this community of faith—so that we might give and share all; not keeping them for ourselves, but freely giving with glad hearts because of the overwhelming beauty of the life we share.

A life of gratitude is not about living in the past, but learning from the past and embracing the future. James reminds us that we were created to bear fruit, and are spiritually endowed with every gift and talent we possess; and Paul reminds us in Philippians 4:

“I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me.” We can learn to be grateful for all things, even if we have suffered great loss. We can learn to practice gratitude each and every day. We can do ALL things through the love of Christ. By grace, we can truly live so God can use us for the good.

Amen.

Hymn # "I'm Gonna Live So God Can Use Me"

Footnote:

- Henri Nouwen, "The Spiritual Work of Gratitude," Henri Nouwen Society, January 12, 2017, <http://henrinouwen.org/meditation/the-spiritual-work-of-gratitude/>.
Other resources: "Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks" by Diana Butler Bass, and David DeSteno, <http://daviddesteno.com>.