

Genuine Generosity
October 29, 2006

The two lessons I would share with you today are from the New Testament; an epistle and a gospel lesson. They can be found in your sermon outline, or, if you brought your Bible, I invite you to follow along. The first passage to which I would draw your attention is from the epistle, Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, the second letter, the 9th chapter, verses 7 and 8. Paul wrote: "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." Now, please turn with me to the Gospel of Mark, the 12th chapter, verses 41-44: "(Jesus) sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 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.'**"

Here ends the lesson. Will you pray with me, please? Oh loving Lord, give us the sense of sacrifice; the sense of purpose and joy that filled the widow's heart and caused her to give so generously. Today, Lord, show us the sacrifices that are worth our investment. In Christ, amen.

Adam Sandler has a new movie out on video. Are you Adam Sandler fans? Phyllis is; I'm with the rest of you. I'm really not an Adam Sandler fan. He's not a particularly gifted actor, in that he seems to play the same role in every movie he is in. Have you noticed that? But my daughter recommended his new movie, so my wife and I watched it. The movie is "Click". You've seen the trailers, haven't you? You see, by a weird change of happenstance, Adam Sandler's character is equipped with a universal remote that empowers him to pause life, and he does some comical things with that. He's also given the ability to fast forward through the difficult moments, and to "rewind" to see again experiences in the past. Christopher Walken plays Morty. This is a movie for adults; it is rated PG-13 because of strong language and some sexual content – it's clearly not for children, but it is very provocative for adults. In fact, I suggest to you that it *approaches* greatness; it does not *achieve* it, but approaches it. Actually, if it had been just a little bit better and released at Christmas, it could have been a contemporary "It's a Wonderful Life", but it falls short of that mark. What I found so provocative is that Adam Sandler's character finds himself drawn into the seduction of fast forwarding through the challenging times of life, only to realize that he has missed that which is most significant in the living of life, even through the challenging, testing times.

It is interesting, a survey was done of people who were near the end of their lives, in which they were asked about their regrets. The number one regret expressed by older adults was not the things they had done, but the things they had left undone - never attempting to attain the challenge. Here's my suspicion: in our culture today, we are so accommodating, always seeking the path of least resistance. Because of our unwillingness to sacrifice, we miss the true significance of life itself.

Come to the scripture with me. It really is provocative this morning. Don't you love it when scripture makes you think? Do you suppose that is intentional; that God has it in His heart to prod and afflict the comfortable while He is comforting the afflicted? In the passage I read to you, Paul is writing to the church at Corinth, and he says something absolutely outlandish. He says that God loves a cheerful giver. "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." You understand the distinction between a cheerful giver and a reluctant giver, don't you? You really don't want to receive a reluctant gift from someone else, because it's given with so much pain and given so stingily . . . "Oh, all right, have it!" That's the last thing you want to receive, because it is given so disdainfully, out of a sense of obligation. Do you comprehend the difference between doing something out of a sense of obligation as opposed to a sense of opportunity? It's like going to church. We all know people who go because they feel like they have to go, and they look miserable throughout the whole thing - it appears that they have been baptized in pickle juice! And then there are those people who come out of a sense of opportunity, and there is an obvious excitement and joy in the endeavor. Think back to when you were young. Did you ever invite someone out on a date and have them respond as if it were an obligation? Did you really want to take that person out if that was their response? Do you suppose it's any different with God? God wants us to be joyous in His presence and give of ourselves generously in response to His love.

Now, turn with me to the gospel. This is really remarkable. Pairing the joyous giver invitation with the widow's story might stretch your imagination, because we always assume that the widow approached the trumpet in the temple to make her offering rather embarrassedly, with a measure of chagrin for her meager gift, and that she did so in a way that was almost sulking - that she furtively came, made her contribution, and scurried away. I suggest to you that to assume that misses the point precisely, and misses the true meaning of the text. That is not how widows give. Having been raised by a widow from the time I was 12, I have a fair measure of experience and expertise in the matter. You need to understand; widows then, and to a measure now, are on the margin of society. They are on the edge. Clearly then, they are very vulnerable and susceptible to economic downturn. They face grave challenges; that's why they give with a sense of purpose. Everything is counted, measured, and allocated. The gift given by the widow in the gospel story was given lovingly, joyously.

Picture in your mind, if you will, please, the scene in the temple precinct. They had these trumpets that were made of metal, and people were invited to come and drop their coins into the trumpet that represented the offering of their choice. You can imagine that when the rich appeared, they poured in their offering and it clattered and rang throughout the temple, whereas this woman came and dropped in two coins that wouldn't total a penny today - almost worthless from the world's perspective. Yet Jesus looked and saw a joy, a sense of purpose and intensity, a sacrifice that was done for significance, and He turned to His disciples and said, "Listen up guys, she gave more than anyone else, for she gave on purpose. She did not give from her abundance. She did not give from the chump change that she carries. No. She gave something significant of herself."

What would that feel like? What would that look like in our lives if we adopted the attitude of the joyous widow? First, if we gave like the widow, we would give from the heart and it would be a genuine sacrifice. C.S. Lewis has written so much and spoken so well on a myriad of topics. When talking about giving in Mere Christianity, he said, "I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare." In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditures exclude them. Let me draw an analogy. Growing up, a lot of my friends were young people who would be the first in their families, as I was, to have a college education. It was fascinating to listen to their parents and my parents talk about it because there was an intensity - a sense of purpose - that engendered a sacrificial spirit. They talked about vacations that were deferred, new cars that were postponed, little luxuries for themselves (such as a dinner out) that were delayed so that they could be saving for their children to have braces, go to college, and become educated. The interesting thing is that there wasn't a sense of pain in that; there was a point of pride. People were *sacrificing on purpose* and it cost them something significant, but they did so in order that their children could have it better than they had themselves. When their child walked across the stage with a mortarboard on his/her head, the parents were the most proud because they had paid the price - they had made the sacrifice - and they had done so for a significant purpose.

We have almost lost that sense today to our own detriment. A week ago, I stood here on Sunday afternoon and celebrated Velma Kirby's life. You remember Velma, don't you? She was one of the dearest, sweetest souls. She used to come to the Bible study. Vernon is just a wonderful gentleman, and I had the privilege of telling the stories of her life. When her parents left their farming community during the Depression, it was so that her father could accept a job teaching at the Boy's School in Wichita, Kansas. Think back, if you will. He was so appalled at seeing children inhabit the streets and the results he witnessed at the juvenile detention, that he decided that he and his family would do something. So, they lobbied in their local Methodist church to build a gymnasium in order that the children of the community would have a place to gather - so that they could come and have fun and get off the streets. The church did not have the money, so Velma Kirby, her three sisters, and her two parents, every week for four years - *every week, listen to this* - prepared and served a dinner at church, with all the proceeds going to build a gymnasium for the children. Can you imagine that kind of sacrifice? Their specialties were chili and chicken dumplings. (Can you imagine how sick they became of making and smelling chili and chicken dumplings?) The sacrifice required then is no different today for us. What we are about as the church is significance. We are called to have an impact on the world; we are about changing lives, and it is worthy of our sacrifice. What that means is that means that if your gift to the church costs you nothing, you are giving far too little and you are missing out on the grandest opportunity imaginable. For when you give from the heart and you give sacrificially, you give with a sense of joy and purpose.

I went to HyVee just this past week to get flowers for my wife. (The women all smiled and the men are thinking, “Why didn’t I think of that?”) It was so cool! I went to HyVee and pulled up at the same time as a guy (I think he was a painter) pulled up in his truck. Our vehicles were nose to nose. He hopped out and I hopped out. I didn’t know him, so I just smiled and we both went in. I did a little shopping and got a small bouquet for MaryAnn. As I was going back to the car, he was arriving at his truck at just the same time. He had this big bouquet of flowers and he looked at me, pointed toward my bouquet and said, “You in trouble?” And I said, “No. Are you?” He said, “No, I just love my wife!” And he leapt in the truck and I’ve got to tell you - that man was so excited! Last night at the service I told that story, and there was a woman here for worship who said, “That may have been my husband; he does that every week.” Can you imagine? Now, as delighted as she is to receive the flowers every week, if that *was* her husband I saw in the parking lot of HyVee, *he’s* the one who has the greatest joy, because he is making a sacrifice of love. It fills his heart with delight, because he is doing something on purpose. Ladies and gentlemen, that’s what we were created for. When we become mere spectators in life - when we try to take the easy way, the path of least resistance - our lives become most empty and despairing.

The Spanish philosopher, Miguel de Unamuno, tells about a Roman aqueduct built to carry fresh water from the mountains of Spain to his little village. It was constructed in 109 A.D., 1900 years ago. For 1800 years, it carried fresh water and served that community for nearly sixty generations. Then another generation – a recent one – came and decided that it was such an architectural wonder, it needed to be preserved as a museum piece. They believed that carrying the water might be detrimental to it, so they cut off the supply at the Suarez. Do you know what happened? Immediately, when the water was no longer coursing along the bricks, the mortar began to shrink and crack as it was baked in the sun. Today, that 1900 year-old Roman aqueduct, which served for 1800 years, is crumbling, because it no longer serves its purpose. As I look around, I see people unwilling to make the sacrifice - unwilling to experience the joy - and their lives are miserable. For it is only when we are challenged, only when we are stretched, only when we sacrifice for a mighty purpose, that we discover the joy and the pride.

Last night I went home after the 5:30 service, pulled into my driveway and, as I was going to the mailbox, I noticed my neighbor, across the street and on the corner. He was sitting on his steps, just looking at his house in the dark. Let me put it in context for you. This house was recently on the market. It had been owned by a couple who divorced, and had fallen into significant disrepair. In fact, it was an embarrassment in our neighborhood. The lawn wasn’t mowed, there was a huge dead tree out front, and the shrubs were dead. Birds had made a hole in the side of the house and were nesting there, flying in and out constantly. It was a mess. The house sits right on the corner of Overbrook and Game Creek. Anyway, this fellow, a big working man, put in a bid just at the point that the bank was going to foreclose, and bought the house. I met him before he moved in. As we were chatting, I said, “Are you going to flip the house?” (Are you going to fix it up and sell it?) He said, “No I’m going to live in it. I want my kids to go to the Lee’s Summit Schools, and I want them to have a nice house. So I bought this at a great

price and I'm putting in the sweat equity." You cannot believe what is happening in that house. He clearly works at his job during the day. But on nights and weekends, he's laboring intently toward his purpose. He's torn out all the shrubs, redone the lawn, taken out the dead tree, gotten rid of the birds, and the house is beginning to look great. As I went by last night, he was just sitting on the steps looking at his work. I stopped to talk to him and said, "Mark, what are you doing?" He said, "Just looking." "At what?", I asked. "At my house; it's finally starting to look good." When you come to the end of your life, will you be able to survey the life you've lived, the sacrifices you've made, and say, "It looks good"?

The third and final truth is one we miss in the text: joyous generosity is contagious. Do you know what that looks like? Let's test it out. Turn and smile at the person next to you. (Pause for the congregation to follow Jim's instruction) Do you have any idea what's so cool about watching that? Let me tell you. When you turn toward your neighbor, you give them that kind of goofy, fake smile and then they do the same to you. It looks so ridiculous, you can't help but laugh, and then they start laughing. That's just what happened. You're still smiling. It's so refreshing as a preacher to see people smiling at me. You know something? Joy like that is contagious.

When you live on purpose and live sacrificially, when you give with a sense of joy and delight, it's contagious. I think immediately of Jimmy Carter, don't you? I mean, I don't know what your politics are (and I really don't care to know!), but whether you're a Democrat or a Republican, it is doubtful that you remember Jimmy Carter as a great President. He really wasn't, but he's become a great *former* President. He has really done some significant things to change the world. Do you recall how much he aged when he was in office? He looks better now than he did when he left office in 1981, because now he lives on purpose - he lives with joy. He's doing what he loves and he shares his enthusiasm in such a way that it's contagious; it's drawing people closer to his heart, his values, and his purpose. I think that's awesome, but it doesn't have to be true of just Jimmy Carter; it can be true of you. You can make a difference in this church. Imagine the impact of your contagious joy and generosity on a church like this. Imagine people coming together and dreaming God's dreams and seeing God's vision. Imagine what can happen if only we give from our hearts and do so with joy, allowing others to catch the vision of what's possible in Christ. Today's sermon is not hypothetical; it is not theoretical. This is a message that is truly an invitation to you to be a cheerful giver and to give as did the widow.

Some of you have brought your commitment cards today. If you have, will you take those out, please? If you did not bring your commitment card, there are some in the pew before you. Will you please find one? If you are a visitor in this church, this is not for you. If you are a regular attender in this church and just have not joined yet, this is for you if you consider this to be your church. I want to call something to your attention. On the commitment card, you have the opportunity to give from the heart, to give with joy, and to give with real generosity. Will you, at this time, please accept that invitation? First, please write legibly so we can read your handwriting. In fact, if your spouse is beside you, show it to him or her and say, "Can you read this?", because it is so difficult

sometimes to read the handwriting. Please, take a moment, as I have. Jim is going to sing for you a song, which is a prayer from the heart. While he is singing, I invite you to commit your heart to Christ, and to do so joyously. Please prayerfully consider the gifts and resources that God has entrusted to you, and give joyously, give from the heart, give sacrificially. Amen?