

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**  
**23<sup>rd</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
**REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON**  
**“GENEROSITY: THE MEASURE OF OUR GIFTS”**  
**Mark 12:38-44**  
**November 8, 2009**  
**8:45 A.M. Service**

Generosity is the solution to most of our problems in life. We could end poverty and hunger if we were more generous in sharing life's goods. We could save our marriages, our families, and the institutions of society if we were more giving of ourselves. I would love to be able to convince you this morning that you are a gift to be given.

In his book *The Art of Loving* Erich Fromm suggests that true loving is not something simple and natural, but an art that must be learned. Loving involves the giving of oneself, and in our acquisitive society we are more concerned with getting than giving. All the gifts we give are to some degree symbols of the gift of ourselves.

In their purity and innocence children think of gifts as altogether good. My granddaughter is always asking me, “What you got for me, Papa?” What could be better than receiving, or being promised, a gift? Adults have learned to be suspicious, even a bit cynical. “**I have a gift for you,**” one colleague says to another. The other responds, “**What's it going to cost me?**” For people of every age and attitude, however, giving and receiving gifts is a part of life. Our faith is profoundly helpful on the subject of gifts and giving.

Today we find Jesus teaching in the temple. He says, “*Beware of the scribes.*” Scribes were more than secretaries; they were prestigious interpreters of the Mosaic law. They were associated with both the Sadducees and the Pharisees. Some scribes, Jesus says, like to go about in long robes and be recognized in public. They covet the best seats in the synagogues and at the feasts, and pray long prayers for show. They are also greedy. Widows and orphans were ancient society's most vulnerable individuals, because they were without the protection of a male. Jesus says some scribes took advantage of widows by confiscating their

possessions. Near one of the temple collection boxes Jesus sits down. He points out the contrast between the large gifts of the wealthy and the tiny gift of a widow, who gave only two copper coins amounting to a penny. The widow's gift is greater than all the others because she gave everything she had.

The true measure of a gift is not the price paid by the gift-giver, much less the amount the recipient might get for it at a pawn shop! The quantitative value of a gift says little or nothing about its qualitative value. A wealthy landowner in Palestine might put a gift in the collection box that is thousands of times larger than the gift of the poor widow. Yet, if it is money he will never miss, it is infinitely smaller than the widow's penny. Jesus understood that the measure of a gift is in its meaning, and you cannot give more than all you have.

Gifts can be tricky. They can be deceitful, and they can be deadly. In his saga, the *Aeneid*, the Roman poet Virgil tells of a devastating trick played on the people of Troy by the gift of a huge replica of a horse. They were warned, ***“Do not trust the horse, Trojans. Whatever it is, I fear the Greeks even when they bring gifts.”*** The horse housed warriors, and after the destruction of Troy the world was left with a maxim: **“Beware of Greeks bearing gifts.”**

A gift always has a symbolic meaning, whether that meaning is obvious or not. An extraordinary gift may symbolize the extraordinary love one person has for another, or it may symbolize the extraordinary need of one person to impress another. A gift may represent something the giver wants from the other person, as when a husband gives his wife a vacuum cleaner! Gifts can symbolize gratitude, regret, or merely an obligation. Gifts may stem from mixed motives, and they may communicate mixed messages. But most of us, most of the time, give gifts as genuine expressions of our affection, our appreciation, or our caring concern. Such gifts are a blessing to both recipient and giver.

What about our gifts to God? What do they symbolize? What about our financial gifts to the church? What do they signify? In Jesus' time some religious offerings were given primarily to impress onlookers. But isn't it true today, as well? Do we ever give anything from a perfectly pure motive? Mixed in with our sincerity in giving there may be an element of bartering, of wanting something from God in return. Because of childhood training, some of us are motivated by a sense of legalistic obligation in our giving. Maybe some of us need a little guilt to help us do the right thing! Ideally, however, our gifts symbolize our awareness that all of life, and creation itself, comes from God, who is the Source, Guide, and Goal of all things. And our gifts symbolize the priority of Christ in our lives, as

well as our desire to help build Christ's kingdom in the world. Sometimes we give as part of a spiritual discipline we have undertaken, and sometimes we give out of sheer joy and thanksgiving. God ***“loves a cheerful giver,”*** but giving as a spiritual discipline cannot depend on feelings.

God is the perfect gift-giver. ***“Every perfect gift,”*** says the New Testament writer James, ***“is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.”*** (1:17) God gives from a pure motive and without mixed messages. God is present in the gift. God's own self is given in every blessing and in every revelation. God's gifts are symbols of God's being and nature. Our faith declares that God's greatest gift is Jesus Christ. What is the content of this gift? In Jesus Christ we encounter the reality of God. Gift and Giver are the same.

An old romantic ballad says, ***“I can't give you anything but love.”*** What else is there? Don't you know that those who love you want nothing more, or less, than you? And they always know whether your gift is a symbol of your love or a substitute for your love.

What does such a God want from you? Whether you are giving to God, or to your loved ones, or to someone in need, ultimately your gifts are symbolic of the gift of yourself. The real gift is you. And this is precisely what a loving God wants most. **You!** God does not want your money, without you. God does not want your obedience, without you. No gift can substitute for the gift of yourself. ***“Holding a beggar's child / Against my heart, / Through blinding tears I see / That as I love the tiny, piteous thing, / So God loves me!”*** (T. Kagawa)

So much of what Jesus taught is easily verifiable. When we give ourselves to another person or to a worthy cause, we discover that it really is ***“more blessed to give than to receive.”*** When we lose our lives in service to others, we do indeed ***“find”*** our true lives. Conversely, when we live in isolation and self-centeredness, life becomes empty and meaningless. The things that endure are not the things we keep, but the things we give away in love. The way of Jesus is the victorious way of self-giving love.

I encourage you to experience this blessedness of giving for this stewardship period. I am pleased to give myself in service to you as the shepherd of this congregation. I love you. I bless you. I thank God for you. And I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.