

## **Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – October 18, 2020**

### **Introduction**

**As most of you know, I am a lectionary preacher.** On most Sundays, I usually develop sermons that center on the appointed Gospel for the day. Using the Revised Common Lectionary as the basis for sermons ensures that the entirety of the Gospel message is addressed throughout the year. However, there are times when I make exceptions to my usual practice. Today is one of those times.

**Our parish is at a crucial time in its history.** We have entered the call process as we seek a new pastor. This is an exciting time for our churches. In our Ministry Site Profile, we committed ourselves to compensating our new pastor at NE MN Synod guidelines. This commitment was not lightly made. It was based on the financial records and giving histories of both congregations. Both church councils approved the Ministry Site Profile before it was submitted to the ELCA and the NE MN Synod.

**Our seminarians graduate with a substantial debt that comes from their college and seminary expenses.** This is not to imply that candidates base their decision to accept or reject a call solely on financial compensation. Our candidates have answered their individual calls to serve as ordained pastors and deacons in the church. But congregations must also answer their call to support their pastors as part of their mission in the community. This usually takes the form of volunteering time and talent, *as well as treasure*, to the support of the ministry of the Church.

**This is what stewardship is all about.** As your intentional interim pastor, I would be remiss if I did not say something about stewardship at this time. All churches are facing a crisis as we talk about how to gather and do worship in the time of the coronavirus. With reduced worship opportunities and fewer parishioners who will risk entry into the confined space of the sanctuary, worship offerings have also decreased. Last spring, our congregations were able to qualify for the Federal Payroll Protection Plan which was a six-month plan that allowed businesses and churches to receive monies from the government to cover payroll expenses. These funds do not have to be repaid if the federal criteria are met. We have done so.

**We now must look to the future.** It is unknown if there will be additional funds available for payroll support. Negotiations seem to be at an impasse. This is why stewardship is important. We must support the ministries that we are called to do. My sermon is not a typical *'asking for money'* affair. Instead, I write with the intent of inviting you to think about your own stewardship as we move into the future. We do live in difficult times that come with many uncertainties. God only asks that we be faithful with what we have been given. And that, I believe, rests at the heart of any discussion about stewardship.

**In Christ ✝,  
Pastor Steve**

**Gospel – Mark 12.38-44**

**As he [Jesus] taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”**

**He 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.”

**“Words We Would Rather Not Hear in Church”**

**Let us pray.** O God, in your love you have given us gifts which our forebears neither knew nor dreamed of. Mercifully grant that we may not be so occupied with material things, that we forget the things that are spiritual; and thus, even though we have gained the whole world, lose our souls; through Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

**Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.**

**One of my favorite comedians was George Carlin.** He died on June 22, 2008. George Carlin was person who had a strange way of looking at the world. He could see humor where no one could. Perhaps some of you remember him. In addition to being funny, Carlin was also very controversial. He liked to test boundaries. In October of 1973, a radio station broadcast part of a monologue done by Carlin several months earlier. The monologue was an uncensored version of something he called **'The Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television.'** You can use your imaginations to figure out the words. *I am not going to repeat them because they are as bad as you think!*

**The broadcast caused quite a stir in the media industry.** The Federal Communications Commission sued the radio station saying that it had violated numerous decency standards. The radio station cited its rights by quoting the First Amendment of the United States Constitution: *'Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech . . .'* In effect, they said, *'We can play what we want . . . That's our constitutional right!'* After six years of litigation, the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor the FCC in a split decision. The radio station was barred from broadcasting Carlin's monolog and other such material, but no penalties were assessed.

**I know what you are thinking: 'Why do I need to know this? . . . What does this have to do with anything here at church?'** Let me put it this way: there may well be seven words you cannot say on television, but there are also **'four words you can never say in church.'** Pastors learn very quickly that these words are: **'money,' 'tithing,' 'stewardship,' and 'pledge.'** When you say them, you immediately know that you have crossed the line with your congregation. You can see it in their eyes; everyone suddenly gets defensive. I know from experience.

**When I had been in my first parish for two weeks, a well-meaning lady said to me, 'Pastor, I'd like to talk to you about stewardship. There are some things you need to know. We do not talk about the M-word around here because it makes people uncomfortable. On Stewardship Sunday, we talk about teaching Sunday School, about quilting, and about other ways of serving in the church . . . Everyone likes to hear about those things. We never talk about money . . . it just takes care of itself.'** But unfortunately, I had already looked at the church's financial statement for the previous year; the money did not take care of itself. Local

expenses were just barely met while benevolence and missions often went unsupported.

**On the one hand, the woman was correct.** Christian stewardship is much more than just money. It involves the use of our time and our talents in the service of Jesus. In churches the size of Bethel and Immanuel Lutheran, there are ample opportunities for its members to do so. Through baptism, each one of us has been called to serve in a unique way. The Lord Jesus needs each one of us to carry on the work of the Kingdom where we live.

**But on the other hand, the woman was incorrect.** One cannot deny the importance of money in stewardship. Be it an individual or a congregation, much can be learned about spiritual health by looking at check registers. It is there we learn about our true priorities. Stewardship reveals the slippery character of the old Adam and Eve with us. Just hearing the word ‘money’ in the context of stewardship, makes us defensive. This is an indication of our brokenness.

**I know what I am talking about because I get defensive too.** I sat in the pew for many years before ordination. I have seen stewardship drives come and go. I have listened to dozens of stewardship sermons. And I became uneasy when the preacher started talking about money. But one year, my home church, St. Timothy Lutheran in St. Paul, crossed me up; they sent stewardship callers to visit every member in the congregation.

**Please understand, this happened right after I started working as an engineer, long before I was married.** After some small talk, we got down to business. The time and talent card was a breeze to fill out. I liked to teach Sunday School, to work with the youth, and to usher. It was easy to volunteer for things I enjoyed. But then, the caller got around to mentioning the ‘M’ – Word. He was very polite. He said that he did not know what I was giving, nor did he care. He said, ‘Steve, will you think about increasing your pledge a little bit this year? It takes money to do the work of Christ.’

**I said nothing: but my thoughts were flying.** ‘Who did this guy think he was anyway? . . . What more do they want, I’m already giving X dollars a week and I am stretched to the limit. What about those other people who do not give anything? Why don’t you ask them for money? After all, you’ve got to be fair. It is their church too. Nail them.’

***Ironically, his visit had interrupted the planning of my upcoming ski trip to Jackson Hole, Wyoming.*** So after an uneasy silence, I finally said, ‘Why don't you let me think about it for awhile?’ Needless to say, my old sinful self was working overtime. I tried to justify what I was giving. I tried to shift the focus to someone else; but deep down, I knew that what other people did or did not give had little bearing on me. So I stalled and asked for more time; just hoping that the caller would go away and never come back again. ***Thank God he was persistent.***

***Today's Gospel takes place at the height of Jesus' popularity.*** Large crowds followed him everywhere as he made his way to Jerusalem. But as St. Mark tells the story, the opposition to Jesus is growing. The closer Jesus gets to Jerusalem, controversies with the authorities become sharper. First, the Pharisees came with questions of piety: *Why don't you keep the Sabbath? Why do you eat with those who are unclean?* Then the priests and the Herodians asked: *Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Will there be marriage in the resurrection?* And finally, the scribes with all their legal niceties: ‘Jesus, what is the greatest commandment.’

***Each question was a minefield.*** Each question, if not properly answered, was the grounds for a heresy trial before the Sanhedrin. Jesus had become a threat to all they held dear — their God, their country, and their own well-being. Jesus had to go. St. Mark continues the story.

***When the scribes and lawyers left him, Jesus said to the crowds [standing in the Temple courtyard], ‘BEWARE OF THE SCRIBES, WHO LIKE TO WALK AROUND IN LONG ROBES, AND TO BE GREETED WITH RESPECT IN THE MARKET PLACES, AND TO HAVE THE BEST SEATS IN THE SYNAGOGUES, AND PLACES OF HONOR AT BANQUETS! THEY DEVOUR WIDOWS' HOUSES AND FOR THE SAKE OF APPEARANCE SAY LONG PRAYERS. THEY WILL RECEIVE THE GREATER CONDEMNATION.’***

Then, moving across the courtyard to the Temple's treasury, Jesus sat down and watched the people giving their offering before they entered the sanctuary to worship. Each offering was deposited in one of thirteen large, metal horn-shaped receptacles. Gifts of silver and gold coins rattled into the box.

**St. Mark tells us that ‘Jesus watched as they put their offering into the treasury.’** He observed the wealthy noisily dropping large amounts of money into the treasure boxes. They were paying their tithes very publicly for all to see. He also saw a widow, obviously poor from her clothing, quietly slip into the treasury and drop two small coins into the horn. **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 . . . ’**

**And Jesus watched as they put their offering into the treasury.** I do not know about you, but that is not a particularly comforting thought. It might be hard to justify what we give to Jesus. But Jesus is not watching their only money clank into the money box, he is also watching the givers and reading their hearts. You see, financial stewardship has never just been about money; it’s always about heart and motive.

**And Jesus watched as they put their offering into the treasury.** I wish it was different. I prefer to think about stewardship as a private affair; something that is not talked about in public. Oh, we tolerate temple talks; we live through stewardship drives; but we do not like it when we hear the pastor talking about money. If there are more than one or two stewardship sermons a year, members have been known to say, *‘That’s all they talk about here is money. I want to hear about spiritual things. Don’t they know, money is tight right now during the pandemic? Besides, I don’t agree with everything they are doing. The church has enough money to get by. They will just have to cut expenses. All they do is give everything away. We ought to be saving money!’*

**We Lutherans have developed a strange piety when it comes to money.** Even though Biblical scholars tell us that Jesus talks more about money than any other topic except God, we get uneasy if there is too much money talk in church. You know? he four words we would rather not hear in church: *‘Money’ . . . ‘Tithing’ . . . ‘Stewardship’ . . . and ‘Pledge.’* But Jesus does not care. That is not the way it works in the upside down world of the Kingdom. Everything is backwards: the first are last, servants are given precedence over their masters, and the penny gifts of widows gain more notoriety than bags of gold given by the rich and famous. The widow went away justified, and the wealthy, empty.

**So why give? What is Jesus saying to us? What is faithful stewardship? First, we give because it is our response to what God has done for us.** Stewardship is returning to God what he has first given us. It is the first thing we do after we say ‘I believe.’ It is our grateful reaction in celebration of the life God has given us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the Gospel of John, Jesus reminds Nicodemus and all who would follow him, “. . . **GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON, THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM SHOULD NOT PERISH, BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE.**” God loved all that there was, so God gave all that God had. Stewardship is our response to God.

**Second: We give because we need to.** Every time we give of ourselves, we participate in the mission of God. Every time we give our money for the work of Christ, we declare our dependence on God. That is what the story of the widow’s two pennies is really about. The wealthy gave substantial gifts to God, but they still lived unto themselves. As Jesus pointed out to his disciples, they gave out of their abundance and had much left.

**But the widow was different.** Although she had two pennies, she did not keep one for food and give the other to the Lord; something permissible according to the Torah. Even though her two-penny offering was nothing when compared to the gifts of others, it was the widow’s statement of faith showing that she was totally dependent upon God. Like it or not, our readiness to give is a measure of our spiritual health. Giving is a reminder that we are dependent upon God for everything we have. **Stewardship** is a way of thanking God for the gracious gifts we have been given. **Stewardship** is way for us to give ourselves to the work of the Kingdom. **Stewardship** is the opportunity to give back to God what God has already given us.

**So how do you end a sermon about stewardship?** I really don’t know. Just for the fun of it, let’s say the words out loud that we’d rather not hear in church. Repeat after me: **‘Money’ . . . ‘Tithing’ . . . ‘Stewardship’ . . . and ‘Pledge.’** Amen.