

HOW MUCH SHOULD I KEEP?

Psalm 127
Mark 12:38-44

Faith Community
November 9, 2003

Introduction

Most people seem to think that the Bible is about sexual morality. The impression seems to be, go to the Bible to find out what you shouldn't be doing. Actually, the Old Testament contains some very unusual sexual situations – beyond even what you see in movies today. So maybe in that sense it's true – you go to the Bible to see what you shouldn't be doing!

Would it surprise you to know that the Bible has nine hundred more references to money than it does to sex? It may be more accurate to say that the Bible is about the morality of money. In the Bible how we use money is important.

I

In our scripture this morning Jesus and his disciples sit opposite the temple treasury. People come by and drop their offering in the treasury box. This is an awkward process for most people.

In Jesus' time people didn't fold a crisp bill and slip it into an envelope, they didn't write out a check and discreetly slide it into the slot. Their money was heavy coins. So the people who were giving a lot of money had to carry a heavy, jangling bag of coins and hoist it into the treasury box.

We can picture the disciples sitting opposite this treasury, watching people bring their money. "Wow! Look how much that guy is giving! He must be really well off." It could become like celebrity watching.

When our kids were younger we used to hang out at the back door of the theatre after a concert or performance to see the celebrities, and sometimes get their autographs. This scene with the disciples might have been something like that. Who's the most impressive giver? Who brings the most money to the treasury?

II

In the midst of all this Jesus draws their attention to a poor widow. In Jesus' time "poor widow" was redundant. Widows were poor almost by definition. When a woman became a widow she lost everything. In that culture women had no rights, they were considered part of a man's property. So the widow got no inheritance, she had no one to protect her, or care for her. Frequently widows were beggars in the streets.

One of the things that the early Christian church did was hold “agape meals” – these were like pot-luck dinners that the church held, and they invited the widows and other poor to come without having to bring any food. To be a widow usually meant you were in a desperate situation.

As the disciples are watching how much people give, Jesus points out a widow who comes to the treasury box. She reaches into her pocket and takes out two copper coins – everything she has – and drops them into the treasury. Jesus says, “There is real giving! She gave everything she had.”

III

In the church we talk about percentage giving. We say it isn’t the amount you give, but the percentage of your income that you give that counts. That’s what Jesus is talking about here – except that it’s a percentage we can’t even imagine.

The fact that she only gave two copper coins isn’t what matters, but that she was willing to give all she had. Her two coins wouldn’t pay for the air conditioning at the temple for two minutes. It isn’t the amount that matters but the incredible concern that she had. She was willing to sacrifice her last two coins because she cared.

In my mind Jesus should have run over to the woman and wrestled the coins from her before she made it to the box. “You keep these, you need them. What are you going to live on if you give this money away? Stop and think about this.” But that’s not what Jesus does.

IV

Actually more than once Jesus said that people should give everything for God. Remember the rich, young man who came to Jesus? He earnestly wanted to know what he must do to enter the Kingdom of God. Jesus said to him, “Go and give all that you have to the poor and come follow me.” The man went away sad, because he many possessions.

Do you remember the scripture reading from last Sunday? Jesus said the greatest commandment is to “love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength.” Love God with everything you have. It’s not unusual for Jesus to ask someone to give everything to God. So when he sees this woman doing that – he praises her and holds her up as an example to his disciples.

V

I wonder if the widow in this story is threatening to us. We give from our discretionary money – she gave all she had. Most of us pledge from the money we have left over when we have paid for the mort, utilities, car payment, and our entertainment. From what’s left we give to charitable causes.

This is sort of the “Rummage sale principle.” We donate what we don’t really need. It is the excess, the leftovers. I think we do this because we ask the wrong question in the first place. We ask, “How much should I give God from what I have?” The real question is, “How much of what God has given me should I keep for myself?”

One couple decided when they got married that they would give ten percent of all they earned to the causes of God. At first that was a difficult struggle for them. They didn’t have a lot of money and it was hard to make it stretch. But they stayed true to their ten percent commitment.

As they grew older they found the ten percent was a much easier part of their budget. At one point they decided that giving ten percent wasn’t really a sacrifice for them. So together they decided to raise their giving to twelve percent. A few years later they upped it to fifteen percent. Today they set aside twenty percent of their family budget for the church and other mission giving.

VI

This year’s stewardship program is rightly based on giving as one part of the practice of being a Christian. In the first mailing we were asked to indicate which of the characteristics of faith we would try to emphasize during the next five weeks. The disciplines included: worship, meditation, reading scripture, praying, fasting, practicing hospitality, simplifying our lifestyle, and generous giving.

These practices help us grow in faith. The best way to be a stronger Christian is to live as a Christian everyday. Those eight practices are an excellent place to start. So, if we want to grow in faith we can do that by growing in our giving to God’s causes. By increasing our commitment to the work of Christ through Faith Community we can grow deeper in our Christian commitment.

I will encourage you again this year; if you aren’t currently giving ten percent take at least a small step toward that biblical principal. Increase your giving this year by one or two percent, so that you can get closer to a tithe. In a matter of time you will reach the biblical ten percent relatively painlessly.

Conclusion

A widow comes to the temple treasury and puts in two copper coins. It’s all she has in the world. We’re shocked that she would do this. She gave everything away! But, then look at Jesus. When he was called to give himself he didn’t say “Well, I think I might be able to spare two or three percent.” Jesus didn’t even tithe his life for us – didn’t give ten percent. He didn’t give twenty or fifty percent, he gave everything for you and me.

He gave it all. What does he ask of you?

Amen