

Community Church of Issaquah

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How Much Is Enough?

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I wouldn't exactly say that I made a mistake, but my one simple act of giving has really opened the floodgates in unexpected proportions. You see, I got a letter from Marlo Thomas – you remember her father, Danny Thomas of TV fame – and St. Jude's Hospital with a very heart touching request for a donation. It didn't seem unreasonable at the time, so I wrote a check and sent a small gift. Not long after that, I began to receive a second request from St. Jude's plus a request from Boys Town. What would it hurt to send a few dollars more to both of them? So I did. It didn't dawn on me that there was an underground network of charities who shared donor information with each other. I'm sure they tagged my name with something like "he's a sucker – go after him!" or the something like that.

That did it. The letters began pouring in from every kind of charity. Most come with bribes – a sheet or two of return address labels, three pennies that you are supposed to send back, and the most recent – Christmas cards. I now have about 5000 return address labels, maybe 100 or more Christmas cards, six 2023 calendars, and a variety of pens and other not very useful items. I'm happy to share those if you'd like. I have plenty! And now the daily mail always brings more. This week alone I have received donation requests from 11 other charities.

You and I are a part of a world in which we are constantly being asked to contribute. There are fundraisers for our schools and civic organizations. We are asked to contribute to a host of needs that are very real and very

urgent. Compassionate people that we are, there is a heaping of guilt that is self-imposed when we cannot give to every hand that is held out to receive. Our initial reaction is to say a healthy response, “That’s enough!” But there is this nagging question that people of faith struggle with often, “How much is enough?”

The answer to that question varies from person to person. What is enough for Bill Gates might not be enough for you. But this morning’s Gospel passage gives us some very real clues about how to find our own answer to that question. Did you catch that portion of verse 33 in the 12th chapter of Mark in which the scribe to whom Jesus had been speaking acknowledged that he agreed with the master about loving God and loving one’s neighbor. And then he added something quite interesting that is often overlooked in this passage. It was a simple comment that indeed loving one’s neighbor has more merit than, as the Scripture says, “all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” We don’t really give burnt offerings these days, except my baked goods that too often end up donated to the compost bin. Anyway, back to the story.

I love Jesus’s response when he considered what the man had said. We would probably translate it in modern language as “well, that’s not far from the truth.” And it isn’t far from the truth because it is our love of neighbor that forms the basis for all of our giving. I didn’t give my \$50 to St. Jude’s Hospital to impress Marlo Thomas. I don’t even know her! And her father is dead, so I can’t impress him. But compassion for those children and their families dealing with cancer – that drove me to give. The love of those neighbors whom I don’t even know and who will never know that I gave a pittance to their charity was the reason for giving. We don’t give to the homeless or the hungry or anyone in need because we

might get something in return. We give because our neighbors are in need.

But have you translated that love of neighbor based on our love of God to this very church? When I was a congregational minister before my chaplain's position, which I did for more than 30 years, I recall one congregational member who handed me a check one day and said, "Pastor, I want you to take this money and buy some pew cushions because my rump can't take another hour on these wooden pews. I can't pay attention when my backside is asleep." My initial reaction was to assume my preaching was boring (and I must admit that sometimes it was) and he would often doze off.

The truth of the matter was that his gift was more about a building or a pew or something material and not at all about his neighbor. Honestly, I would certainly want everyone who comes to a worship service to be comfortable, but churches can't afford recliners for everyone. There's not enough space for those! As Christians and particularly as church members and attenders, we are often confused in our thinking that when we give to our own church, the money is given to a building. It isn't. Every dime you give to this congregation should be given so that collectively you can offer comfort and compassion to your neighbors. That's what church is all about.

I think the scribe was right about loving our neighbor being more important than any burnt offering or sacrifice. And I think Jesus hit the nail on the head when he told him, "You got that right, Brother." And how do we know that? Because the last portion of that 34th verse says that after Jesus gave his reply, not a single person asked him another question. Oh, how I wish I had been there to witness that! I've been tempted so

many times in my own ministry to respond to a situation with a quick comeback like, “You’re not far from the truth and not far from the Kingdom.”

There is a second portion to the answer for the question of how much is enough. Jesus is in the temple having dialogue with the scribes about humility and compassion, and as he sat there, he notices across the room the treasury table where temple dues were collected. I’m not sure you are aware of this, but there are still faith communities where your financial resources are examined, and a portion set aside as your dues or required giving. Most churches, however, just have a pledge system and we give as we choose. It’s a better system. You may be aware that the reason there is a denomination called Free Methodist is because this break-away group refused to pay pew taxes and instead allowed congregants to come to worship free of charge. Aren’t you glad you’re a part of a Free American Baptist congregation with no pew tax?

Now back to the story. As Jesus sat observing those who put money into the basket at the treasury table, he observed that some people of wealth came to give large sums of money, mostly for show. We assume their gifts had little to do with loving either God or neighbor, but loving self and for pretense. And then a poor widow came to the basket and dropped in two mites. It would be hard to convert that to modern currency, but if we tried, it would be equivalent to about one half of one cent. Yes, I said 1/2 of a penny.

When he saw this, Jesus was moved by her act of grace. She had given all that she had in her poverty, but the rich had given a gift for show out of their wealth. So that begs the question, which one gave enough? And

how would you measure that? I like the way J B Phillips paraphrases it in his New Testament version:

Then Jesus sat down opposite the Temple alms box and watched the people putting their money into it. A great many rich people put in large sums. Then a poor widow came up and dropped in two little coins, worth together about a halfpenny. Jesus called his disciples to his side and said to them, "Believe me, this poor widow has put in more than all the others. For they have all put in what they can easily afford, but she in her poverty who needs so much, has given away everything, her whole living!"

Don't get me wrong. I'm not telling you that it will not be enough until you give away everything. What I want you to take away from these very personal and relevant verses is simply this: your motive should be more important than your money. Wherever you give and to whomever you give it, make sure that the reason you reached into your purse or wallet is because you compassionately want to help your neighbors – both the known and the unknown – who are in need. When you give to this church or to any other organization, do so because as a person of faith who loves God wholeheartedly, you follow that teaching of loving your neighbor and sincerely want to be a part of the greater good of meeting a need.

I recently read of a young woman who was walking along a sidewalk in a large city. She encountered a homeless man sitting at a corner with his little cardboard sign asking for money. The young woman stopped, squatted down so she could look the man in the eyes and said to him, "I don't have any money with me, but if you don't mind, I'd like to give you something else." And she leaned over and gave him a firm hug. The man looked up with watery eyes and said to her, "That was better than money.

Thank you.” A simple act of compassion became enough. It was what she could give to a neighbor in need.

It is important to consistently share of our financial resources. It’s important to be a part of the giving in our faith family here. Christ calls us to give what we can from what we have. Sometimes that is a monetary gift to sustain the life of the church. Sometimes that is a gift of time or talent which are also important in our ministry to neighbors. Sometimes it is the simple gift of being present for someone who needs us. These are all a part of our response to our love of God and neighbor, and an even greater response to God’s love for us.

Let me close with a personal story and my own take about this whole idea of giving and how much is enough. One time I was working with some clergy projects in the Tri-cities area. One night I went to a Red Robin restaurant for dinner. It’s always interesting to me as I sit alone and observe what goes on around me. Every table and booth in my area was full, and the server whose name was Amber was flying around from table to table doing her best to take care of everyone’s demands. At the booth next to mine, a young couple had an abundance of needs that kept Amber hopping. She did it all with such grace, something my patience would have given up on very early in the evening. When the couple got their bill and gave their money to Amber to pay, she returned quickly with their change. The young man gathered up the small amount from the tray, the two of them rose and walked out. When Amber came by to collect the tray, it was completely empty – no tip. She simply shook her head and scurried on. When my turn came to pay, I added my own tip to my charge card receipt, but then called Amber to my table. I gave her a ten dollar bill and said, “I saw that the couple next to me left without leaving anything for you, so I wanted to cover that.” She looked shocked and

said, “You don’t have to do that!” And I replied, I’m not doing it because I have to. I’m doing it because I want to.”

When the offering is taken and received each week, know that as people of faith, we don’t give because we have to. We give because we want to. We want to help. We want to heal. We want to love. And when you do give with those motives in your heart, I truly believe you will have an assurance that it is enough. Just as the poor widow, we give what we can because we want to. Amen