Sermon on Mark 12:41-44
St. Matthew's Ev. Lutheran Church
Joyful Giving: Week II

Should Jesus Really Be Watching My Wealth?

JESU, JUVA!

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

What is the first thing that pops into your mind when I say the word *God?* Do you picture the One who fills the universe with his presence? Do you think of the One who knows absolutely everything? Do you picture the One who is all-powerful? Now, another question: how do these descriptions of God make you feel? "Oh, pastor, I love the fact that God is EVERYWHERE—he's with me wherever I go." "Pastor, it's such a comfort to know that God KNOWS everything, because God knows everything that I need." "Pastor, I'm at ease because God ALMIGHTY can take care of each and every issue in my life." If you think those things and feel that way, you would be absolutely correct.

But not so fast! There is always a flip side to the coin. The fact that God is *everywhere* - is that always a comfort? If God is everywhere, then he is also behind every closet door and in every back seat on a Friday night... If God *knows everything,* then he also knows perfectly the repressed memories of my past and the sins of the present that I am eager to keep secret... If God is *almighty*, then I can only tremble at the times when I have ignored his will and become the Almighty's adversary!

This morning, we hear that Jesus is WATCHING. Take comfort! The God who watches over you neither slumbers nor sleeps. Jesus is watching. Take warning: God is watching every area of our lives, even if we don't think he has a right to, even when we don't want him to! Frankly, the fact that Jesus is sitting there watching as the temple offering is gathered offends our American right to privacy! As we see Jesus watching the poor widow give her offering, we ask the obvious question: "Should Jesus Really Be Watching My Wealth?"

We've got a question. God's Word has the answer. Listen: Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury (Mark 12:41).

It is surprising enough that Jesus sat there watching people give their offerings. What is surprising times two is that he took time to watch people give their offerings on TUESDAY of Holy Week. On Friday, he faced the cross! With the clock ticking and time running out, what does Jesus do? He SAT DOWN in the temple courts, at the very place where people GAVE THEIR OFFERINGS. And note well, Jesus didn't take a seat because he needed a breather. He sat down specifically so that he could WATCH the people as they gave their offerings. The Greek word is explicit here: Jesus was *studying* the people as they gave, and he did this for some time. For Lutherans trained to be discreet when putting their envelopes into the plate, the thought of Jesus sitting there, watching, staring, studying, makes us more than a bit uncomfortable.

So again, I ask: Should Jesus really be watching wealth? If you and I were Jesus' ministry advisors, we would say absolutely not! Jesus, you have bigger fish to fry. You should spend your time watching for a *place* to eat the Last Supper with your disciples. You should watch your *step*, because the Pharisees are out to get you! You should watch your *back*, because Judas is plotting to betray you. Jesus, you have plenty of people and things to watch out for! But watching what people are doing with their wealth at the temple? Should Jesus really be watching that?

Well, what did Jesus see? Many rich people threw in large amounts. This doesn't seem all that surprising. We would expect rich people to be big givers. After all, Jesus himself once said: From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked (Luke 12:48). As Jesus watched the rich and famous, he wasn't surprised by the amount of their gifts. But there is another Greek clue: It seems as if the wealthy were coming back to get in the offering line again and again. There was some pomp and show to their offerings. *"Excuse me! Mr. Usher, can you run the plate past me a second time, please? I forgot to put my OTHER envelope in!"* Jesus was watching the wealthy's wealth - and he had a special eye on the wealthy's attitudes in giving it!

Then Jesus saw another person, not rich or famous, not really significant by society's standards. Listen - can you picture the scene in your head? 42 But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. Again, what here surprises you? This widow was poor - no surprise there. Social Security wouldn't be invented for another 1,900 years. She offered two tiny copper coins - the bare minimum required for the temple tax. A poor lady gave the minimum possible. Again, nothing shocking there, but Jesus was watching the widow's wealth too!

Jesus was watching the wealthy and the poor widow. And what he saw, he needed to share with his disciples: 43 "Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others." This widow, this woman no one else noticed, was the one our Lord truly noticed! She had given more than all the others. Can you picture the disciples scratching their heads? 'You mean to tell me, Jesus, that this widow with her two copper coins gave more than the rich who gave their tens of thousands?' That doesn't even make sense! To the eyes of men, it makes no sense. To the eyes of Jesus, it makes perfect sense. Jesus could see what the disciples couldn't: 44 They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything-- all she had to live on."

When Jesus watched Jerusalem's givers, he saw the rich give out of what was left over. They gave part of the frosting on a very large cake. They gave their thousands, but they had thousands left over. They went home to a warm house, a full fridge, a hot meal, and a cozy bed. And the next day, they woke up and began replenishing their thousands by putting their wealth to work. They gave big gifts, but there was precious little personal sacrifice behind those gifts.

The widow was different. She didn't give from what she had left over. She didn't give some frosting off the cake. She didn't even give the cake. She gave her daily bread! She gave everything - all she had to live on. She didn't give thousands. In fact, she gave about 50 cents. Her offering was small, but her self-sacrifice was total. She gave her bread money, her milk money. She gave until she had nothing left - and at that very moment, she still had absolutely everything. She had her Lord. She had God's promises and faith to trust them. The big point today? She gave as if she trusted the Lord.

Now I have another question: If you were sitting in Jesus' seat, watching the widow give her offering, what would you have told her? 'No, my dearie, God knows your heart. He knows you don't have two dimes to rub together. He knows you will give it someday, when you get it. Hey, here are two more pennies. Go and buy yourself a cup of coffee and an Egg McMuffin.' I'm willing to bet - at least two copper coins - that we would have done our best to talk the widow out of making her offering. And in so doing, we would have talked her out of doing the exact thing that Jesus commends her for! My point? Could it be, just every now and then, that we are far too eager to make pious-sounding excuses NOT to give and not nearly eager enough in encouraging one another toward godly generosity?

Why is that? We usually think that giving has to do primarily with the wallet, and that is precisely wrong. Today's readings show that giving has nothing to do with the wallet. Whether it was the tons of gold that King David gave to build the temple or the two copper coins the widow gave to maintain it, the amount doesn't matter. What matters is the attitude in your heart: Do we trust God - or don't we? Yes or no. When was the last time we gave as if we truly trusted the Lord? What do I mean? Let me give you a few examples:

- Why is it so easy to give thousands of dollars to Fidelity, Vanguard, or Charles Schwab every year? Because we TRUST that these people will make our money grow. But have you noticed that Charles Schwab, makes no promises to us? Seriously! *"Past performance is no guarantee of future results."* Charles Schwab makes no promises. God does! "And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8). Why are we so tempted to trust Fidelity more than our faithful Father? Charles Schwab more than our Creator? Jesus is watching our wealth. What does he see?

- Or another thought: *How much faith* does it take to go through the drive-through to pick up some Happy Meals? How much faith does it take to pay for cable or internet? Yet a large majority of Christians give God less than their happy meals, coffee and cable costs. In both churches I served, the super-majority of members gave less to the ministry of their church and their children's school than to Spectrum Cable. And we wonder why budgets are tight. Jesus is watching our wealth. What does he see?

All of this makes me wonder: Why, when the median household income in America is more than 8x's the rest of the world - and Oconomowoc almost 11x's the rest of the world - does the average American give a little over one percent to all charities combined? We tip our waitresses 18%, but tip God 1.2%? We pay 18.9% to Citibank interest, but 1.2% to invest in Christ's kingdom? Does that even make sense? Could it be that so many Americans feel broke because our priorities and attitudes towards wealth are broke? 1.22% feels like it might be a ways away from the JOY, WILLINGNESS, and THANKSGIVING that we see on display in David, Israel's leaders, and the people in today's Old Testament reading....

The point? If you trust your wealth, you're already broke. But if you trust your Lord, you're already rich. Think of it: Do you think that Jesus let the widow go home to starve? Does Jesus feel like the sort of character who commends a gift in the temple, but ignores our needs when the widow goes home? Why could the widow trust God in that way? Because the widow, by faith, knew that God is a God who gave himself fully for her!

Think of it: The "big givers" in Mark 12 sacrificed precious little. The widow in Mark 12 sacrificed dearly. The One who sat and watched all this *sacrificed himself completely!* What dedication to your salvation did it take for Jesus to leave the streets of gold for the manure of Bethlehem's barn? How completely does Jesus love you as he lived his life for you—rejected by men, exhausted from exertion, without a house to call home, without a pillow to rest his head? How completely does Jesus sacrifice for your salvation as he goes all the way to the cross for your forgiveness! He didn't shed silver or gold for you. He shed his blood for you!

Brothers and sisters, remember, the one who watches your wealth is the almighty, *saving* God. Take comfort in that! The one who prays "Give us this day our daily bread" is the one who turned around and fed 5,000 hungry stomachs with only a little boy's picnic lunch! The one who said, "I thirst," is the one who washed you clean in baptism and blesses you with the waters of everlasting life! The one who cries out, "Why have you forsaken me?" is precisely the one who will never leave you or forsake you! Why would I not trust a God like that? No, thank God that we trust a God like that!

Listen: the critical issue before our congregation is this - *"Will we, together, give in such a way that shows we trust God?"* Is it possible that we are content to think too small? Can we close the budget gap? Can we pay down the amount we owe on the mortgage? Can we keep school tuition at a reasonable cost? If we are content to tip God every now and then, no. If we trust him, absolutely! But can we think bigger than balancing budgets? Is God powerful enough, almighty enough, kind and caring enough, to enable and inspire us to burn mortgages, staff our ministries, and double down on our early-childhood and school ministries? Could it be that God has hundreds - perhaps thousands - of souls in Oconomowoc and that he intends to use us to bring his Son to them? Could it be that God is so generous that he just might be able to bless our St. Matthew's family beyond our wildest dreams? Absolutely, for in Christ, God has already graciously given you ALL THINGS (Romans 8:32).

Jesus is still watching his people's wealth. What will he see? A tip? God forbid! Or deep-seated trust? God give it! Your Lord is faithful; trust him. And that, friends, you can take to the bank! Amen.

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