The Gift of Our Treasures

By

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From the Pulpit of

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First Lesson | 1 Chronicles 29:6-9

Then the leaders of ancestral houses made their freewill offerings, as did also the leaders of the tribes of Israel, the commanders of the thousands and of the hundreds, and the officers over the king's work. They gave for the service of the house of God five thousand talents and ten thousand darics of gold, ten thousand talents of silver, eighteen thousand talents of bronze, and one hundred thousand talents of iron. Whoever had precious stones gave them to the treasury of the house of the Lord, into the care of Jehiel the Gershonite. Then the people rejoiced because these had given willingly, for with single mind they had offered freely to the Lord; King David also rejoiced greatly.

Second Lesson | Acts 2:1-13

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."

Sermon

In recent weeks we have reflected on the privilege in being faithful stewards of God's abundance. We began by pondering the gift of time and how we bless the Creator and this body of faith every time we share a portion of our 24-hour allotment. Last week, we reflected on the gift of talents and heard the testimony of a few members and the blessings they experienced in the sharing of their diverse skills. Today, we focus on the gift that comes in sharing our treasures.

Both of our Scripture lessons offer examples of believers from the past who did just that.

The initial one recalls a day when King David launched the only capital campaign described in Scripture. To help his son and soon-to-be successor Solomon build the temple, David

announces generous gifts from the national treasury and himself. Our reading begins.

"Then the leaders of ancestral houses made their freewill offerings, as did the leaders of the tribes of Israel, the commanders of the thousands and of the hundreds, and the officers over the king's work." The author goes on to summarize the level of generosity, describing much of it in terms of "talents." In this case, "talent" does not refer to a particular skill or ability but a measurement of their currency equivalent to 20 years' wages. If that record is an accurate tally, then an incredible amount of money was given. Yet the joy that followed on that day was not due to the grand total, but the motivation for the offering. As they had not given grudgingly or due to peer pressure. Instead, we are told, "the people rejoiced because they had given willingly, for with a single mind they had offered freely to the LORD; King David also rejoiced greatly."

During the second hymn, you will be invited to come forward and place in a basket your Commitment Card for 2027. You can also do with the offering plate. That paper will share your hope for the sharing of time, talents, and treasures. It will be a wonderful moment, yet just like Israelites the joy here will arise not from the campaign total but the spirit in which we give.

Our second lesson recalls the most famous act of generosity in the Bible. It comes from a moment on Jesus' final Tuesday when he watched persons put money into the Temple treasury. There were thirteen containers for contributions around the Temple Mount. Shaped like a reverse trumpet, each container had a sign indicating its purpose. Some were for animals to be sacrificed or gold for maintaining the altar. There were two for the required temple tax and six for free-will offerings. Jesus sees wealthy people giving large amounts and an unnamed widow offering two small coins. "Truly I tell you," he says to his disciples, "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."

The King James Version of Scripture refers to the woman's offering as the widow's mite, but the two coins were actually known as leptons, the smallest

currency in that era. Frequently compared to our penny, such an analogy isn't perfect as in Jesus' day it took 128 leptons to make a denarius, a day's wage. If a denarius was the same as today's minimum wage, then a person working eight hours would earn $58 so the widow's gift would be about ninety cents. In speaking of that offering, Jesus said she "put in more than all those who are contributing..."

Over the years his words have evoked much discussion. Some have suggested Jesus was speaking about the importance of attitude in giving or that the only gift to celebrates is when one gives everything. There are problems with either interpretation, as Jesus makes no mention of the spirit behind the contributions he witnessed that day and elsewhere praises individuals for gifts that didn't include everything they owned. Others hear this scene as one when Jesus is lamenting a temple system of financial support that pressured a poor widow to give her last coins. That is certainly possible, too, as prior to that scene he criticizes "scribes who devour widows' houses." Still, I hear him making a different point, praising the sacrifice of one who did her best.

Years ago, I read of an offering envelope with these words written on it: "Please don't be mad. I don't have much. I'm homeless." It was found by the counters at the First United Methodist Church in Charlotte, and the envelope contained 18 cents—one dime, one nickel and three pennies. There was no name and they never learned who made the contribution. They suspect it was an unhoused neighbor who had come to worship after the church's free breakfast

A member of the Finance Committee saw the envelope after collecting the day's offering. One of the pastors took a photo of and then posted it on the church's Facebook page. "When I saw the note," he said "I just wanted to assure the giver that every gift and every giver is important. I felt deep gratitude because it is likely that this individual reached into his or her pocket and gave everything." (Sashin, Daphne "Church touched by 18-cent donation," www.cnn.com, 04/30/15)

BMPC is grateful for every gift, too. We are uniquely blessed here by an endowment that provides one-third of what is required for our operating budget, but those resources come from gifts offered in the past, mostly from

individuals now at rest with God. Some might wonder if offerings today are still needed given that head start. They are. It still takes all of us to make possible the amazing breadth of ministries offered here. Every gift counts.

One Sunday in my first pastorate, there was a commotion in the pews. It was early in that worship service when a long-time member named Frances Wright slumped over. People nearby caught her and helped her stretch out on the pew. I immediately left the pulpit to go check on her while someone exited the sanctuary to call for an ambulance. Frances was conscious and talking when I got there, embarrassed to have interrupted the service. I assured her she had nothing to apologize for, and we had a prayer together. Later, we would learn that she had had a TIA—a minor stroke. Frances would soon be back in worship, but we didn't know that at the time either.

I walked back to the pulpit and informed the congregation of what was happening. Silence followed as we waited for the EMTs. Soon, the quiet in the sanctuary became uncomfortable for all of us, especially this newly ordained pastor. It was not the kind of circumstance for which I had been trained. With all eyes on me, I quickly decided that while we waited, the congregation would sing the next hymn already listed in the bulletin for the day. I announced the plan and our organist got back on the bench. We began to sing. "Rock of Ages."

For the first couple of verses, I was feeling pretty good about how I had adapted on the fly. Yet as we neared the end of the third stanza, in what turned out to be only the first of other reminders that, as the book of Proverbs puts it, "pride goes before the fall," I looked ahead to the fourth verse. Perhaps you recall how it begins: "While I draw this fleeting breath, when my eyelids close in death…" If I could have silenced the organ before those words, I would have done it. Instead, we awkwardly sang that line even as we began to hear the ambulance siren.

After the service, more than one parishioner teased me about that decision and while it's true that I have long since gotten over the embarrassment of that moment, it's also true that in the 38 years of selecting hymns for worship since not once I have chosen "Rock of Ages!" Still, the most enduring memory of that morning came when our singing ended, and I walked

back to Frances as the EMTs entered the sanctuary. I stayed with her as they did their work, and just before they wheeled her out on the gurney, Frances handed me her offering envelope.

Whatever gift you share in 2027, it will bless this community of faith and you. Whatever decision you make regarding the offering of your time, talents, and treasures, it will honor the source of every gift. For without a doubt, in such gifts, BMPC will once more give glory to God.