

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC  
PENTECOST 23 (PROPER 27B), NOVEMBER 8, 2009

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"A Penny for your Thoughts"

*"A poor widow came, and put in two small  
copper coins, which are worth a penny."*

(Mark 12: 42 NRSV)

This sermon begins with a "dis-claimer!" Usually, disclaimers come in one of two forms. Either the management does not necessarily agree with the information being presented, as in a "Letters to the Editor" column, or, the disclaimer is a warning, as in "The following material may not be suitable, etc." This morning's disclaimer is a warning. While the material to be presented is entirely suitable for all ages, and while our financial campaign is "officially" over, the content may make you want to go home and re-think your "giving pattern" for the coming year. The sermon is entitled, "A 'penny' for your thoughts!"

Having issued the disclaimer, now here is another one of those rhetorical questions that you only need to answer in your own mind. During the Service when we receive the offering, do you ever notice what your neighbors in the seats closest to you put in the offering plate? Come on now, be honest, in all the years you have been attending church, haven't you at least once seen something strange or memorable? Perhaps it was simply the fact that the gift was hidden

in an envelope and you were just curious. Perhaps it was a young child who put a shiny coin in with a big smile and you wondered if it was a part of their allowance or just something given to them by a parent at the last minute. Or maybe it was paper money of a rather large denomination that caught your eye! It might even have been one of those times when a person actually put in a large bill and *took out change!* Don't laugh, it happens! Often, however, the plate is passed and nothing is given. Nowadays this is usually because the giver has already sent in a check to the treasurer through the mail. But sometimes it really is as if the worshipper was singing that old hymn, "Nothing in my hand I bring!" A penny for your thoughts!

This is not meant to be facetious. In fact, Jesus did the very thing described above. One day he was sitting near the Temple treasury and watching what people gave. He was amazed by the gift of a poor widow who put in two coins worth a penny. Somehow Jesus knew that this gift represented *all* that this woman had, rather than a portion of her wealth. He was so impressed by this sacrificial gift that he called the attention of the disciples to it. He wanted to teach them what a gift to God really means. Maybe through this text Jesus can teach us the characteristics of the largest gift a person can give.

The widow gave her gift cheerfully even though she was giving her last penny. It

came out of her need and poverty. She could have hated to part with it, because she needed it for food. She, however, gave it willingly and cheerfully. No one asked her to give. She was not handed a pledge card. She was not pressured by an Every Member Canvass. She was not put under any mandate to give. Obviously to Jesus, her intentions were golden, even though her thoughts were only represented by a penny!

Intentions are important. In the Episcopal Church we put a lot of stock into intentions. Our statistical history shows us that if the intention is to thank God, to meet a need, or to strengthen the church, we gladly give, and we are cheerful about it. The point is illustrated by that old story about the man who had two coins in his pocket that were about the same size. When the offering plate was passed he was caught off guard and by mistake he put in his lucky gold coin that was of great sentimental and actual value. After the Service, he went to the usher and tried to exchange it for the coin he had *intended* to put in. The usher refused to cooperate. The man said, "Okay, keep the old coin. God will bless me for it!" To which the usher responded, "I suspect God is not going to reward you for what you gave but for what you *intended* to give!" It would seem that a penny can represent a lot of thoughts!

Indeed, a penny represented a lot for that widow. She gave a proportionate gift. She gave the entire portion of her wealth.

She gave 100%! Think of what that would mean for us today, if we were to give all we have: bank accounts, CDs, stocks and property! Is this what Jesus is teaching, that we should do the same? Are we to follow the widow and give up to God everything that we own? A penny for your thoughts!

Well relax, for a search of our text also reveals that Jesus does *not* say "Go and do likewise." This teaching, like many of Jesus' instructions, was not intended to be taken literally. God does not expect us to give every last penny to the church. Surely God knows that would create a socialistic bureaucracy that no human agency could handle! God does not want us to be penniless beggars standing in line for the "dole."

Instead, God asks us for only a portion of what is ours. In the Bible it is traditionally called the Tithe - 10% of your yearly income, off the top, and *before* taxes! It is the official standard of many churches, *including* our own Episcopal Church! For some, the tithe is easy, for their wealth is great. For others, the tithe seems hard, especially in these economic times. As one person was heard to say, "Why is it that a twenty dollar bill looks so large in the collection plate and so small in the grocery store?" I suspect that Jesus would respond that it's all relative; it depends on your intention. It depends on whether or not your giving is a sacrifice.

Now *there's* a thought that requires more than a penny! The widow's penny was a

sacrificial gift because it constituted her entire wealth! She gave her all because of her faith in God and her love for God's house. Giving for her was an act of worship. Therefore it would seem that what Jesus is really asking of us is sacrificial giving. He is asking each of us to determine what level of giving would constitute a sacrifice in our financial lives. He is asking for an act of worship!

The reasons for giving are simple to understand. After hearing the Word read and preached telling us of God's love in the event of the Cross, we respond with a thank offering. We offer our gifts as an expression of our faith, love, and gratitude. Since Christ gave his all for us, we want to give something in return. Our giving flows out of our faith. Some would go so far as to say that because of what Jesus did for us, giving is not Christian giving *unless it is sacrificial*. A true gift always costs us something. Therefore true Christian giving might even go *beyond* the tithe when a tithe is not a sacrifice. In other words, some thoughts cost more than a penny!

In a parish far away and many years ago, I once was asked by a widow who was in a nursing home to please carry her offering to the church since she was unable to attend. Knowing her financial situation, I suggested that God would understand if she kept it for her own needs. She accepted my innocence and naivete graciously and then she said, "Thank you for your concern, but would you deny me

the joy of giving to my Lord?" Ouch! Some lessons hurt when you are young. The lesson I learned from her was that the reward of giving a gift is the joy of giving. Are you in any way depriving yourself of this joy?

Well, there you have it - a sermon with a disclaimer! Was there any unsuitable material, nudity, adult language, violence, etc? Do you think that the management agrees with the content? If you would have had a working remote control in your hand, would you have used it? A penny for your thoughts!