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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
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1 Timothy 6:17-19; Mark 12:41-44
“Anticipating Stewardship Sunday”

Next Sunday, members and friends will be invited to bring forward their pledges for next year’s mission and ministry budget.

This sermon anticipates Stewardship Sunday by looking at some of the ways money is referred to in the Bible and in doing so will hopefully give us an appreciation of the way we handle our finances, how it connects with our spiritual lives and how important it is to share our finances in a community that helps to keep our faith alive.

We pick up the Bible for spiritual nourishment and find it filled with verses relating to money. One source states that 2,350 verses deal with money.

If we were to strike the comments of Jesus about money, we would reduce his teaching by more than one-third. He speaks about money more than any other single subject, except for the Realm of God, perhaps because he understands how money can become a god. His assertions, "You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matthew 6:24) and, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also"(Matthew 6:21) indicate his awareness of the preemptive role played by money in the lives of people.

Last week we looked at the commandment to love God and neighbor and I mentioned that one loves neighbor best when one loves God. The same with money: One uses money best when one thinks of God first.

Scripture makes clear there is a fundamental connection between a person's spiritual life and his/her attitudes and actions concerning money and possessions. Often we divorce the two -- Christ sees them as essentially related to one another.

The gospel text just read is given by the lectionary, the church-appointed scripture for today. It's the famous “widow’s mite” story which I’ll comment on later.

First, Jesus says in Luke 16:11: "...if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?" Responsible money management is responsible spirituality.

In Luke 14:28 Jesus says, "For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?"

Our session, the governing body of our church, is wrestling with this question and spent their entire meeting last month discussing the state and future of our church. The commitment among our leadership for the well-being and vitality of this church is exemplary. It's tough being a church in Marin County but we are pursuing every avenue for well-being and growth. I've always thought

that if people knew what goes on here they would flock to it. Who wouldn't want to be in a place that affirms the best of your life – spiritual vitality, solid community and encouragement to participate in making this world a better place, and so on.

The session is concerned about our fiscal future and has arranged to continue their conversation with the entire congregation after the worship service on February 3 to be facilitated by the mission presbyter, the Rev. Dr. Bob Conover.

Proverbs 21:20 states: "Precious treasure remains in the house of the wise, but the fool devours it." The session recently revised our Endowment Fund to support our savings and budget for the future. It's a solid document and places trust in our future. The Redwoods Log has excellent articles on this vital ministry of the church. It calls for prayerful and thoughtful participation.

The New Testament text written by Timothy and read by Ani is amazing: "As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life."

I like the last part. It doesn't matter whether we are rich or poor: When we do good, are generous, and share with others, we take hold of "the life that really is life." For us, that's life in Christ.

Finally, the gospel story: Jesus sits down opposite the temple treasury, and watches the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow comes and puts in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Jesus calls his disciples and says 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."

I find it interesting that Jesus watches people putting money into the treasury. He is fascinated, it seems, with how people give to the temple. He appreciates all who contribute to the place where the Torah is housed and proclaimed; where people pray and are challenged by the words of the law and the prophets. The temple is a refuge and sanctuary. It's the place where rituals are conducted, sacrifices made, and transgressions pardoned. It is a valuable place for Jesus. It's God's house.

Why, we may ask, is Jesus so intent on pointing out what the widow gave? Why did she give everything she had? I don't think Jesus is telling us to give everything we have to the church. That would be foolish. Something else is going on. What would drive a person to give everything they had to a single community?

The story is not really about giving your last cent to the church or to any organization. It is simply about giving. The widow had little and in giving her little she gave the equivalent of all she had but she wanted to give it anyway. She had her reasons.

Perhaps her giving was her trust that in the simple act of giving the temple would continue its existence. Her giving wouldn't do it but she gave anyway. Perhaps she gave because she received more than pennies in return from the temple. I cannot speak for her but I imagine she was grateful for what God had given her as she struggled through the difficulties of widowhood. It was hard for widows in those days. No doubt, she had been the recipient of the care promised her in the Hebrew Bible which had special concern for widows and orphans. She received love and reciprocated in her simple giving.

Perhaps the story is about sacrificial giving. I don't know. *We* give because we want Redwoods to continue to the glory of God in this community. Our church gives us a sense of God's presence in our lives. It boosts our spirits, provides meaningful community, and brings comfort and encouragement. It is the place where we experience love and are challenged to share that love with our families, friends and world in heartfelt and practical ways. We are grateful for all God has done for us in and through the church.

In the end, this anticipation of stewardship is not so much about money. It's about giving. A stewardship brochure in a church I once served said: "Giving says it all." The Bible says that our money is given to us as a gift and we give that gift to the glory of God to best of our understanding of God's call in our lives. We use it for the building of God's realm on earth.

The last two Sundays Clay Wiens and June Bellen shared a Stewardship Minute for Mission. The chair of our Finance Committee, Tani Girton, will bring the message today. Tani: