

**“Mirror, Mirror”**  
**Psalm 146; Mark 12:38-44**  
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She is hard to spot in that crowd, the unnamed woman who slipped into the temple in Jerusalem one day long ago. A lot of other people were there – people with money and power and influence. They made a great show of dropping their money into the large open-mouthed horns that were in the temple to receive the offerings. The air was full of clanking and clattering as the gold coins rumbled down the mouth of the horns. The woman unobtrusively reached into her own pocket. She removed two small copper coins and placed them in the treasury.

No one even noticed, except Jesus, who always kept his eyes open for people on the margins and for signs of the outbreak of heaven on earth. He noticed her. Actually he did more than notice her. He knew the two most important things there were to know about her: first, that she was of modest means, and second, she was the wealthiest person in the place, in terms of the riches that last. “Look at her,” Jesus said to his followers. “The rest of them have given out of their abundance. She out of her poverty has given all that she had.”

Have you ever played the card game “Hearts”? It’s been a long time since I have, so I cannot remember all the rules, but I do remember that you don’t want to be holding the Queen of Spades at the end. I also recall that, in the game, a moment might come when you realize that you do not have much going for yourself, and you decide to “shoot the moon.” You go for broke. This woman at the temple, though possessed of little, had the courage to go for broke for God.

She is like a mirror to me. I look at her, and I see things about myself that could stand a little improvement. I preach for a living. I can recite by heart many of the words of Jesus, such as these: “Those who want to save their lives, will lose them. And those who are willing to lose their lives for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel will save them.” How can a person actually live that kind of life? A shoot the moon, go for broke kind of life for God’s sake?

During stewardship season several years ago, a young mother in the church wrote me a letter in which she accounted a conversation she had had with her young son. The boy's grandfather, her father, was at the time very ill and in the hospital. The mother and son had discussed how Jonathan might do something to make his Papa feel better. Jonathan decided perhaps he should give Papa one of his stuffed animals. They went into Jonathan's room and went through the great, massive collection on stuffed animals, dinosaurs, teddy bears, Elmo's, so on and so forth. Jonathan rejected every one. He said, "I know what I want to do. I want to give Papa my Tigger."

His mother said, "Jonathan, Tigger is your favorite. You can't go to sleep without Tigger. You play with him everyday."

"He would not be moved," the mother wrote, "and so we took Tigger in all his tattered black and orange glory to the hospital. I had wanted my father to have something my son could spare. But my son wanted to give him his dearest and his best."

Where does that kind of thing come from in the human heart? I think of the spiritual wisdom taken straight from the marrow of the bone of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. "It is in giving that we receive," St. Francis of Assisi said. It is in letting go of the self that we are reborn into the authentic human life that God intends.

Years ago, I read about two little boys suffering from severe malnutrition in a war-torn nation in Africa. The relief worker was filling the bowls of the children at the refugee camp, and the two brothers came each with their cup to be filled. The food was put in each child's bowl. As the two little boys turned away, one handed his bowl to his brother. The relief worker said, "Aren't you going to eat something?" The little child answered, "I think my brother is hungrier than I am. Besides, I ate yesterday."

Where does this kind of thing come from? I believe it enters the human heart straight from the heart of God, whose own son gave his life that we might have life and have it in all its abundance. What I am preaching to you this morning is the most radical message I could possibly preach. Everything in our world and society tells us that we will be happy if we

get more; yet, here is the counter-cultural message that happiness has to do with our capacity to share and to give freely.

I have recently read a book by Harvard psychology professor Daniel Gilbert, which analyzes what makes people happy. (It will make Dr. Gilbert happy if you pay \$29.95 for the book!) You will not be surprised to hear his conclusion: money and possessions comfort and ease, are genuinely not the sources of human happiness.

Our Presbyterian tradition has always maintained that a God-centered life, rather than a self-centered life, results in a joyful, happy, human existence. “What is the chief end of the human being?” our Catechism asks. “To glorify God and enjoy God forever.”

This business of happiness and joy is a funny thing. Think of the past few weeks at Morningside. With the disruption of construction, nerves get frayed everyday. Things have gotten lost. People’s patience has worn thin from time to time. But mostly, it’s a joy. I love the mess. I love the fact that comfort and convenience have taken a back seat in our community of faith to courage and to confidence about the future that Christ has opened for us. I am heartened by Paul’s words in the Book of Romans: “I consider the sufferings of this present time not worthy to compare to the glory that is about to be revealed.” Anybody who has ever accomplished anything that matters, every woman who’s ever given birth to a baby, knows nothing that is worthy and lasting comes easily. “The whole creation groans in labor pains waiting for the new to be born,” and what a joyful thing it is to be a part of creating that which is hopeful and new. I rejoice that we have decided to shoot the moon, to give all that we’ve got to embrace the promise, trusting that God is going to give everything we really need to keep proclaiming the good news and to embrace the world with the love of Christ.

John Timothy Stone was pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, when in 1914, that congregation stepped out in faith and built a magnificent sanctuary in the heart of downtown Chicago. Sunday after Sunday, Dr. Stone would say to his congregation, “Expect great things from God. Do great things for God.” Whether a church is large in number or small in scale, the message applies across the board: “Expect great things from God. Do great things for God.” If you can step out in faith as did the woman in the temple in Jerusalem, you can be sure that

God will see to it that every need of yours will be fulfilled. That's the promise.

There is not a single indication in all of Scripture that God prefers the gifts of the rich and powerful. On the contrary, we hear the prophet asking, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly before your God." We hear Jesus comparing the kingdom of God to a mustard seed that is tiny in size but massive in potential. Morningside is not a mega-church. Morningside is not a congregation made up of the rich and famous. This is a church that wants to be real, that wants to have an authentic heart filled with love for God and neighbor. This is a congregation that knows how to save a penny and spot a bargain and stretch a dollar. I will never forget asking one week why the candles here behind the communion table were about three-quarters of an inch high. "Can't we replace the candles?" I asked.

I was told, "We try to save on the candle budget. We let them burn 'til they're gone." We are not wealthy here, but we are rich. We are extravagantly blessed here. God has brought us safely across the Jordan. Through many dangers, toils and snares, we have already come, and here we are November, 2006, loaded with spiritual gifts, faith and hope and love and the courage to endure the pain of change so that the new that God is doing in the world and this neighborhood and community can be born.

To my mind, Stewardship Sunday is as significant as our *Time of Promise* Sunday was. Today, we ensure that week after week, day after day, 24-7, people are blessed through music, education, fellowship, and mission. Did you notice that this year's mission budget reflects a 36% increase over last year? Last year it was a 99% increase over the year before! As Michael Perez put it so eloquently, our gifts go to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless and care for the sick. There are many organizations that do wonderful things. I see your faces, and I know you support other enterprises that are good and worthy throughout this city and the world. But the church is the only institution whose sole purpose is to share the love of God through Jesus Christ. When we give to the church, what we give goes to serve others in his name.

I am encouraged that each year, more and more Morningsiders are learning the joy of giving – giving not ‘til it hurts, but until it feels like the most wonderful thing in the world. Happy are those, the Psalmist said, who know where their help comes from. Happiness comes not just in getting your fill but in making sure that your brother and your sister have enough as well. Gratitude, giving, these things go together.

C.S. Lewis wrote, “I have found that the most balanced minds praise the most, while the cranks, the misfits, and the malcontents praise the least. “Praise the Lord,” the Psalms advise again and again. “Praise the Lord.”

From beginning to end, the Psalms are filled with words of praise. In a world saturated with an overabundance of self-congratulation and the assumption that we are who we are because we made ourselves, or earned our way, or because we were smarter than other people or because we invested in the right stock at the right time, praise is the language of redemption. I don’t know about you, but I go to church to be reminded that I am not in charge, to be set straight about the fact that neither I nor any other human being or group of human beings made the world. God gave us everything. The annual holiday of Thanksgiving is a ritualized way of what we ought to do everyday, which is to stop and offer our thanks to God from whom all blessings flow. Pass the pumpkin pie. We are here by grace, and for every facet of human existence, we are truly grateful.

A rabbi went to visit a wealthy member of his congregation in order to ask him for a gift to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. The rabbi told the man about the need. He was unmoved. The rabbi said to the man, “Would you come with me to the window?” Together, they walked to the window and looked out onto the street. “What do you see?” the rabbi asked.

The man said, “I see a lot of people. I see a lot of need there.”

The rabbi then took the man to the mirror hanging on the wall. He said, “Look into the mirror and tell me what you see.”

The man said, “Of course, I see my reflection.”

The rabbi answered, “The mirror and the window are but pieces of glass. We see through the window but not through the mirror, because the

mirror has a backing of silver. Our silver, our gold, our attachment to our possessions – these are what blind us to the needs of others.”

“Now I see,” the man said, and he made a gift that made all the difference to the community of which he was a part.

The widow in the story is our mirror. She helps us see ourselves as we are and as we might become with God’s help.

I close with one remembrance. One Sunday years ago, Al and I heard a young father in our congregation speak on Stewardship Sunday. He said, “When my wife and I were in our early thirties, we had four children and no money. We couldn’t figure out how to give anything to the church, so we decided that every month we would write the check to the church first before paying the power bill or mortgage. We also decided to give 10% of our income before taxes to the church each year. It is a pattern we have followed ever since. I can only tell you that we have had the richest and most abundant life you can imagine.”

All that we have comes from the abundant grace of God, and whenever we give, we are able to step into that most authentic life God intends for every single one of us.

Mirror, mirror, on the wall, help me to see myself as I could be. Amen.

Benediction:

John Wesley was once asked what one person could do on behalf of the kingdom of God. He answered –

Do all the good you can,  
In all the ways you can,  
In all the places you can,  
At all the times you can,  
To all the people you can,  
As long as ever you can.  
Amen.