

***More Than the Minimum* – Mark 12:38-44**

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It's amazing how often we have baskets sitting at tables here at the church collecting cash. You'd think in this era of debit cards, online bill pay, and Venmo, there wouldn't be so many baskets overflowing in cash at church events.

Yet, it happens all the time. This morning, PW is selling tickets for its luncheon this month. And the preferred method of payment will be either check or cash. When the men's Bible study group meets twice a month, there's a basket put out for donations to cover the donuts we eat. And it ends up filled with cash. More and more people are making their Sunday offerings online or through direct debit of their bank accounts. Still, there's usually a good amount of cash left here each week.

And when it comes to the amounts of cash left behind, there's always more than the minimum given. The men's group collects cash for the donuts we enjoy for breakfast. With the amount of cash contributed, we could buy four or five more boxes of donuts than we need every time.

Maybe it's why so many groups ask for free-will offerings at events rather than charging a set price. People historically give more in donations than what a fee asks for.

It speaks to people's great generosity. When it comes to causes people believe in, our generosity is over the top.

The woman who contributed the two copper coins, worth a penny, to the temple treasury? She evidently did the same thing—put in more than was called for.

In reality, who would've blamed the poor woman if she had taken a little out of the treasury rather than putting in everything she had?

Jesus had just finished rebuking the religious leaders for their hypocrisy and abuse of power, specifically for how they devoured

the estates of widows, the group of people of whom she was very much a part; and then Jesus witnessed this widow surrender her entire estate to the very institution that was supposed to protect her.

Why did she do it? Why did she give so much? After all that had happened to her to erase the resources she had, why did she give all she had left to the temple treasury? The scribes had failed her. The temple failed her. The very building itself, Jesus would eventually say, because of how it had been corrupted, needed to be torn down.

And yet, there she was, with her two small copper coins, worth a penny, placing them into the treasury.

Jesus made this observation after she had finished: “This poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had.”

Jesus was right; the woman was poor. But maybe he wasn't right in this sense: maybe she didn't contribute out of her poverty; maybe she gave all she had out of her own personal sense of abundance. She had abundance in her heart—she felt blessed despite all that had happened to her—and it enabled her to put into the treasury all she had—more than just the minimum.

Our world still faces so many challenges: economic recovery following a pandemic, an unhealthy division still in the last phases of the pandemic and how we should behave as a culture, the enduring suffering of the poor and marginalized, the brokenness of families and relationships.

And still, despite these continuing hardships, we shouldn't ignore the abundance in our lives. We have so much. As fearful as we seem to act in the face of what's out there and what lies ahead, we shouldn't discount the blessings we have: meals to eat and safe places to sleep, good schools for our kids, great medical care, family and friends who love us, and, most of all, a God who loves us mightily. Our blessings overflow.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has written extensively on abundance: “We who are now the richest nation are today’s main coveters,” he says. “We never feel that we have enough; we have to have more and more, and this insatiable desire destroys us. Whether we are liberal or conservative Christians, we must confess that the central problem in our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God’s abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity—a belief that makes us greedy, mean, and unneighborly. We spend our lives trying to sort out that ambiguity.”

The abundance we have extends beyond the uncertainty of tomorrow. It exists beyond our belief of whether we think government is too big or that it is not doing enough. It extends beyond our belief of whether we should pay more taxes. It extends beyond whether we think we’re still threatened by Covid and whether our way of life in America is under attack.

Our abundance remains overwhelming for one simple factor: God loves us deeply and always will. And this is reflected in how generous God is to us.

The theme for our stewardship campaign this year is this text from Genesis 9. In it, we’re reminded just how much of what we have has been generated through the authorship of the God we worship. God tells Noah, “Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.”

God gave Noah everything because he loved him. He was loyal and tenacious in doing what God wanted him to do. But first and foremost, it was his love for him as a human being and servant that spawned his generosity.

That generosity has not been lost on us. God practices it all the time with us. Our God gives in abundance. And God gives it through the people God chooses to be as intermediaries.

Quaker theologian/philosopher Parker Palmer once told a story about abundance. He was a passenger on a plane that pulled away from the gate, taxied to a remote corner of the field and stopped.

You know the feeling: The plane stops, and you look out the window and see that you're not on the runway and the engines wind down and your heart sinks.

The pilot came on the intercom and said, "I have some bad news and some really bad news. The bad news is there's a storm front in the West, Denver is socked in and shut down. We've looked at the alternatives and there are none. So, we'll be staying here for a few hours. That's the bad news. The really bad news is that we have no food and it's lunch time."

Everybody groaned. Some passengers started to complain, some became angry. But then, Palmer said, one of the flight attendants did something amazing.

She stood up and took the intercom mic and said, "We're really sorry, folks. We didn't plan it this way and we really can't do much about it. And I know for some of you this is a big deal. Some of you are really hungry and were looking forward to a nice lunch. Some of you may have a medical condition and really need lunch. Some of you may not care one way or the other and some of you need to skip lunch. So I'll tell you what we're going to do. I have a couple of breadbaskets up here and we're going to pass them around and I'm asking everybody to put something in the basket. Some of you brought a little snack along — something to tide you over — just in case something like this happened, some peanut butter crackers, candy bars. And some of you have a few LifeSavers or chewing gum or Roloids. And if you don't have anything edible, you have a picture of your children or spouse or girlfriend/boyfriend or a bookmark or a business card. Everybody put something in and then we'll reverse the process. We'll pass the baskets around again and everybody can take out what he/she needs.

"Well," Palmer said, "what happened next was amazing. The griping stopped. People started to root around in pockets and handbags, some got up and opened their suitcases stored in the overhead luggage racks and got out boxes of candy, a salami, a bottle of wine. People were laughing and talking. The flight attendant had

transformed a group of people who were focused on need and deprivation into a community of sharing and celebration. She had transformed scarcity into a kind of abundance.”

That’s what Jesus did, of course, over and over. Feeding five thousand on a few loaves of bread and a couple fish—turning scarcity into abundance. God always operates toward us from the perspective of giving us everything.

Therefore, remembering how abundant our blessings are, isn’t it then the right time for us to continue adopting a spirit of putting in more than the minimum? Without a doubt, there are times when we can only do the minimum or times when it’s even proper and necessary for us to take something out of the treasury.

But whether times are good or not as good as they could be, God still gives us so much.

And, on another note, whether it’s our dollars to the church, or whether it’s our talents we contribute through the giving of our time, doesn’t it inspire us to be giving rather than receiving when we know that the cause we’re giving to is making a difference in the lives of God’s people?

Author and business guru John Maxwell tells a story about the making of parachutes during the Second World War. These parachutes were packed by hand in a tedious, painstaking, repetitive, boring process. The workers crouched over sewing machines and stitched for eight hours every day. The endless line of fabric was the same color. Then they folded, packed and stacked the parachutes. All that was left was for someone to pull the rip cord.

How did they stand it? They stood it because every morning before they began their work, they gathered as a group. One of the managers reminded them that each parachute would save someone’s life. They were then asked to think, as they sewed and packed, how they would feel if the parachute was strapped to the back of their son, their father, their brother.

These laborers worked sacrificially, unerringly, uncomplainingly, because someone connected what they were doing

to a larger picture, to a larger mission that involved the saving of lives.

Our commitment today to “giving more than the minimum” will help to improve the lives of numerous people. When we come forward at the end of the service and drop our commitment cards into the basket up here in front, we’ll commit ourselves to being part of seventy-some thousand dollars in mission donations next year. It’ll commit us to retaining a church staff utterly committed to leading God’s people. It’ll commit us to the maintenance of this facility that is a hub for mission and ministry.

And our commitment today will hopefully be made out of our sense of abundance—an abundance of blessings that, despite the hard times we may be experiencing, remind us of how good God is and how Christ loves us to the nth degree.

You already give so much. We could ask you to give more, but we really don’t need to ask. You give more than the minimum because you’ve been deeply blessed and loved and are then grateful to share God’s blessings. Thanks be to God.