

## Not One Mite Would I Withhold

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on 11 November 1997, the 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time. Scripture Lessons: Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17; Psalm 127; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

On this stewardship Sunday I have good news and bad news. First, the good news. Earlier this year, many volunteers, headed by Vernon Ringler contacted members and you pledged \$150,000 over the next three years to cut in half our building indebtedness. That's over and above your pledging to the annual budget. That's good news. Again, the Lord blessed us with beautiful weather and many, many volunteers to enable us to have a successful Apple Festival that will help reduce the deficit in our building fund. That's good news. More recently our congregation led the way in making this year's CROP walk for hunger the most successful ever in Oxford. That's good news. There's more good news. Under Jim Sumner's leadership some of our young people participated in the Pittsburgh Project for the first time this past summer. Other young people were able to attend The Great Escape and Camp Donegal. This fall Jim initiated a high commitment Discipleship class on Thursday evenings drawing people from beyond our church. Class members spend several hours each week reading the Bible and preparing for the discussion on Thursday evening. That's good news. But there's still more good news. The Lord has blessed us with over 30 new members this year and since we've been in our sanctuary our average attendance has risen. So there's lots of good news for us to celebrate.

Barb Hill  
Allan Shaul

But there's also some bad news. We stepped out in faith last year and adopted a budget which we haven't been able to meet so far. Sometimes it's hard to distinguish between acting in faith and acting in presumption until after the fact. As a result, our giving has fallen short. That's really nothing new. It's happened many times before. Every church I've served has felt stretched financially. That's the way it should be. Some churches are content to get by, simply to maintain things and stay alive. Our church hasn't been content with that. We've stepped out, taken risks, and our reach sometimes exceeds our grasp. So it remains to be seen if we'll be able to meet our commitments to missions this year or even pay salaries. That's bad news.

But the Gospel leads us to believe that bad news won't have the final word. There's hope. We can fulfill our commitments this year if we all moved in the direction of tithing. If each of us contribute one tenth of the money we receive in our pay check we'd meet the challenge. Many of us come from two or even three income families. If every member tithed our giving would double, maybe triple. I urge you to move in this direction.

But tithing really isn't the whole answer. The Old Testament talked a lot about tithing but the Gospel calls us to give everything we have. Think of the poor widow in our Gospel lesson. She "came and put in two small copper coins, which are worthy a penny. Then Jesus 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.'"

One of the greatest fears we have as we grow older is the fear of not having adequate resources in our old age. Many of us tend to collect and hoard material goods out of fear. We hope to protect ourselves against every possible calamity which might occur in the future. But this anxiety and insecurity can keep us from being generous. We become so consumed with stockpiling enough goods to keep us secure that we fail to pay attention to God or neighbor. And if we do notice them, too often it's in terms of how they can help us to become more financially secure. In contrast, one of the signs of God's activity in our lives is that we become more giving and willing to share our resources (Diogenes Allen, *Eight Deadly Thoughts*). God was at work in that poor widow's life in an amazing way when she put in everything she had.

Jesus minced no words about giving up everything to follow him. He held up this poor widow as an example for all of us to follow. He also said to the rich, young ruler, "Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." Again he said none of you can "become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." And Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a man who found a treasure in a field. He went and sold everything he had and bought the field to obtain the treasure. The book of Acts tells us that the early Christians sold everything they had and distributed the proceeds to all



as they had need. **Very little is said about tithing in the New Testament.** The radical demand of Christ is for us to give him *everything*. The poor widow didn't have much but she gave more than anyone else. She gave *everything*.

Years ago I danced the **hokey-pokey** with our pre-school children. You know how it goes. You put your right foot in, you put your right foot out, you put your right food in and you shake it all about. Then you put in your left foot, your right hand, your left hand, your head and finally you put your whole self in. **Jesus wants us to put our whole selves in the offering plate.** He wants our hands and feet. He wants our lips. He wants our intellects. He wants our wills. He wants our silver and our gold. He wants our love. He wants all of us. God doesn't want us to give our money unless we give ourselves to him. **In the days of Isaiah** the prophet God's people gave their offerings and sacrifices but God said, "I hate them! Take them away! I don't want your money! I want you! I want all of you!" **And Jesus condemned the Pharisees who** <sup>because even though</sup> ~~they~~ <sup>they</sup> ~~tithed~~ not only their money but their mint leaves ~~because~~ their greed also led them to devour widow's houses.

So I want you to do something really radical as you think about signing your pledge card this week. **I urge you not to pledge anything until you first pledge yourself to Christ.** Trust in the gracious mercy of God. That's what we said we'd do when we joined the church. **Turn** from the ways of sin. **Renounce** evil and its power in the world? **Turn** to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior. **Trust** in his grace and love? **Be** Christ's faithful disciple. **Obey** his Word and show his love? Be who we said we'd be and do what we said we'd do when we professed Christ as Savior and joined the church! Let me repeat. Don't give any money to the church until you give yourself to Christ! You can't bribe God! You can't tip God! You can't pay God conscience money! God hates that kind of stuff.

Jesus said that the kingdom of God is like a **merchant who traveled the whole world in search of a perfect pearl**. When he found it, like the poor widow, he gave everything he had in exchange for the pearl. Jesus is the Pearl of great value.

And when we find Jesus we say, "I want this pearl. How much is it?" "Well", the seller says, "it's very expensive." "But how much?" we ask. "Well, a very large amount." "Do you think I can afford it?" "Of course. Everyone can afford it. Even the poorest widow can afford it." "But didn't you say it's expensive?" "Yes. It's value is beyond estimation." "Well, how much is it?" "Everything you have," says the seller. "All right, I'll buy it." "Well, what do you have? Let's write it down." "Well, I have **ten thousand dollars in the bank.**" "Good! Ten thousand dollars. What else?" "That's all. The stock market fell last week and that's all I have left." "Nothing more?" "Well, I have **a few dollars in my pocket.**" "How much?" We take out our wallet and count out \$15. "I'll take it.. What else do you have?" "Well, nothing. That's all." "Where do you live?" "In my **house.**" "I want your house too." "You mean I have to live in my **camper?**" "Oh, you have a camper? I want that too. What else?" "I'll have to sleep in my **car.**" "So you have a car?" "I got two cars." "I want both of them. What else?" "What else? You have my savings. You have all my money. You have my house, my camper, and my cars. What else do you want?" "Do you have a **family?**" "Yes, I have parents and brothers and sisters." "I want them. What else do you have?" "I don't have anything else. I'm all alone without them." Suddenly the seller exclaims, "I want **you** too. Everything becomes mine - family, house, money, cars - and you too." Then he goes on. "Now listen - All these things are mine in exchange for the pearl, but you may use them for the rest of your life. I want you to be responsible for them to me. But don't ever forget that they belong to me just as you do."

That's how it is when we <sup>recognize Jesus as the Pearl of Great Value. Like the poor widow, we give everything.</sup> receive Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. When you receive your pledge card, think of the poor widow who put in everything she had. Give yourself to Christ!. Give everything you have to Christ! And then make your pledge.

Let us pray: Dear Lord Jesus Christ, we have sung, 'Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold.' Enable us not only to sing those words with our lips but live them out in our actions. Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small; love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all. Amen.