

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: July 26, 2015
Sermon Title: Giving: It's More Than Money
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Mark 12:41-44

Mark 12:41-44

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he 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.'

I like preaching about "giving" in the summer because it doesn't make everybody nervous. Once the fall begins, we start looking at the budget for next year, we start worrying about closing the books on this year, we start the annual "Stewardship/Pledge Campaign," we start panicking and thinking about cutting this, doing away with that. You come to church, there are pledge cards in the bulletin, so everybody's guard is up!

But it's July 26th, you've been to the beach. You've been on the golf course. You might be headed to Nantucket. Life is good. So, if I preach on "Giving," you'll be able to handle it.

In fact, it's a little bit of a tease. Our summer Bible Study the past six weeks has been titled "Giving: It's More Than Money." "Giving" and "money" catch your eye, but we actually broadened the idea of *giving* to giving help, giving advice, giving friendship, giving love, and, yes, giving money.

How do we go about giving anything? I suppose we go through a three- or four-step process. First, what do we want to give? Second, to whom do we want to give it? Third, how do we give it so that someone will be willing to receive it? And perhaps fourth, what, if anything, do we expect in return?

Such things range from a birthday gift to an inheritance; from a donation to Operation Hope to what you put in the offering plate; from advice that is solicited to advice that is not expected; from something you give to a friend to something given to a stranger. *What do we want to give? To whom do we want to give it? How do we give it so that someone will be willing to receive it? And what, if anything, do we expect in return?*

During my winter sermon series on "Death and Dying," I told about a dear friend who put white Post-It notes on every item in her house—furniture lamps, rugs—and she wrote the name of the person who was to inherit that item, and she did this years in advance of her eventual demise! Her giving was specific, personal, even fun, allowing for great conversation through the years about the history of each gift, how and where the new recipient would use it. "Oh, that would look great in the parlor by the big window!" or "Why don't you put this in your summer cottage?" or "Did I ever tell you about your great-grandfather when he bought this?" She knew exactly what she was giving, to whom, and why, and she gave in a way that was fun and loving, with nothing expected in return. Let's face it, we spend all our lives giving and receiving, so we should learn the "dos" and "don'ts."

Rachel started off the summer with "The Parable of the Good Samaritan." How to give help *or not*. You know the story. A man gets mugged and left for dead by the side of the road, A couple of religious types (actually, religious professionals, clergy and such) come along, they see him, and they pass on by, just leave him there. I don't know . . . maybe they stepped over him or around him; maybe they pretended not to see him. The Bible says, sarcastically, they were too holy to be bothered, so they passed on by.

I read this week that the pope's popularity is declining, primarily because he notices things, and he refuses to just pass on by. He's not too holy to be bothered by folks lying in the road or mugged by poverty, or crime, or the environment, or injustice, or terrorism, or war, or evil.

He's the pope of a billion people and probably has some influence with another billion or so, and he sees some things that are disturbing. Poverty that doesn't get any better is disturbing. An earth that is crumbling is disturbing. Wars that kill folks willy-nilly are disturbing. Christians being persecuted, ISIS is on the march, bribery and corruption are rampant, human exploitation by humans, of humans . . . all this is disturbing. He's one holy man who refuses to pass on by. The "Samaritan" in Jesus's parable becomes the "Good Samaritan" by also refusing to pass on by.

That's how to give help. The Bible tells us he cleans up the man's wounds, puts him on his donkey, takes him to safe shelter, nurses him back to

health, pays the bills, and finds someone to look after him till he's back on his feet. In other words, he notices. He stops. He assesses the situation. He gets involved. He makes a commitment. He follows through.

Another form of "giving" is advice, and that's a tricky one. Giving advice is never easy, not always popular, and often unwelcome. Receiving advice is also iffy. Think about it. When do you give advice? Somebody needs help. That person may or may not know it. But something's not right in the person's life, something's not going well, and you've decided to insert yourself. Or just reverse it. Imagine in your mind what it felt like when somebody came to you and said, "Let me give you some friendly advice."

The Bible is a great place to start when it comes to advice. First of all, the Bible admits we all need help. Call it advice, call it counsel, call it wisdom, call it intervention, but from time to time, we need advice from outside ourselves.

So the Bible says, "First, seek the counsel, the advice of the Lord." (1 Kings 22:5)

In Proverbs we're told, "Plans fail for lack of counsel." (Proverbs 15:22)

Jesus is actually called "Wonderful Counselor." (Isaiah 9:6)

And Jesus promises us the Holy Spirit as "another counselor." (John 14:16)

And back to Proverbs: "The way of the fool seems right to him; but a wise man listens to advice." (Proverbs 12:13)

The Book of Job is a textbook on how to *give* advice *and* on how *not* to give advice. Job was the Donald Trump of his day. Very successful. Fabulously wealthy. Massive landholdings. Very popular. And never needed to ask for forgiveness because he was "blameless," the Bible says.

(Notice how neatly I wove in a little political commentary just to see if you're awake?)

Anyway, what I just said about Job was true. He was *big*. Then he lost everything, absolutely everything: family, wealth, success, even his own health, all gone, ended up homeless. At that point in the story, his friends show up, and they give up three excellent tips on advice-giving:

First, they just sit with him for a while. They keep their mouths shut. They are just there for their friend. Second, once they open their mouths, they blame Job for everything. It's all his fault. He must have deserved his fate. And third, after beating up on him, finger-wagging and criticizing and guilt-tripping, they soften up and advise him to hang in there, trust God, be patient, don't give up.

So what are the lessons there for giving advice? O.K., silence is a good thing. Hope is a great thing. And blaming the victim is stupid. Or put it this way: showing up, just being there, is the best gift you can give. If you need to say something, frame it in a way that is loving and hopeful. And don't try to speak for God. Remember the third step on my list for giving advice: figure out how to give advice so that the other person will receive it! Telling someone he's bad, stupid, wrong, evil, is not likely to further the conversation. You're ending it.

So Job's friends started right. They showed up. They spent time. They listened. They were patient. That was a great start. But then they got arrogant. They thought they had all the answers. They thought they could speak for God. They ended up kicking the poor man while he was down. Yet, down deep, they really did have their friend's best interests at heart. They didn't give up on their friend, and they begged their friend not to give up on God. That, ultimately, was their best advice. See the big picture. Don't lose hope. Hang in there. The best advice on how to give advice from this whole story of Job is this: be there and be hopeful. Enough said, literally.

And yes, the Bible does talk about giving money. I sent out a survey to a cross-section of our church members, soliciting advice about how we could do our church pledge drive better. And I admitted in the opening paragraph that raising the church budget is the least favorite thing for the pastors *and* the least favorite thing for the church members. We all hate it!

My hate goes way back to my first year as a pastor of a little church in upstate New York. Up there it was my job to do it all, one pledge at a time, door to door. So one Sunday afternoon I set out. At the first house, I walked up on the porch, rang the doorbell . . . and watched through the window as every single member of that family scurried about, hiding behind the couch, pretending not to be there—with the TV still on and me watching the whole thing through the window.

That was 43 years ago, and it hasn't gotten any easier or any more fun for me *or* for the folks hiding behind the couch. Sadly, that church closed its doors two years ago. Done. Dead. Empty. Hiding behind a couch will do that to a church.

So how should we give money to our church or to God? Our Scripture lesson is a lovely little story. Jesus is observing things at the Temple, watching people come and go, say their prayers, do their rituals, make an offering. He notices that some people give very nice offerings, quite notable, generous. But he's especially taken by a poor widow, noticeably poor by her dress, her

demeanor. She drops two tiny coins into the offering box, and Jesus celebrates the greatness of her gift because she has given all. *All*.

There is a very, very old church joke that makes the same point. All the farm animals were gathered together at the local farm animal church, trying to figure out how to balance the church budget. Well, the chicken suggested to the pig, "Let's do a fundraiser! How about a great big ham and egg breakfast?" The pig responded, "That's easy for you to say. You chickens have to give a small donation. But for a pig, that's a real sacrifice! Total commitment!" I told you it was a very old, old joke.

But yes, Jesus does affirm the total commitment of the poor widow. Now, did the widow really give everything? Did she walk out of the Temple penniless, homeless, and starve to death? No. But Jesus knew, for her circumstances, she gave abundantly, sacrificially, I dare say, "lovingly."

But it's not a number; it's an attitude. Historically, Judaism and Christianity set the target of 10 percent giving to God, a "tithe," 10 percent of your earnings. In olden days, 10 percent of your herds, 10 percent of your crops, 10 percent of your fish. However you made your living, 10 percent went to God, or to God's institutions: the Temple, the Church. But, as always happens, people get caught up on the number. Is it 10 percent pre-tax or post-tax; does it include other charities; do you have to count all your assets or just your salary? Everyone tries to weasel around it.

The New Testament gets it right. Jesus says, "Give your all." St. Paul says, "Give cheerfully." (2 Corinthians 9:7) Give all you can, cheerfully. Whatever you give to our church, whatever you give to the Connecticut Challenge, to Operation Hope, to the Boy Scouts, to Project From the Heart, to a beggar on the street, whatever pennies you give to our Pennies for People campaign, whatever you're giving, give your best, give cheerfully, with all your heart.

Yesterday morning at 6:30, Alida and I were at the Connecticut Challenge Bike Ride. Probably 1,300 riders, plus Alida and me. It's early morning. They're about to ride 25, 50, 100 miles in the hot sun. They're paying for the privilege. They're giving sweat, blisters, pain; they're giving a whole summer day and a lot of money. They are giving and giving and giving and giving. The Connecticut Challenge is squeezing every last drop out of them, every last nickel, every last dime. And there wasn't a grump in the whole bunch. There were smiles and hugs and high-fives everywhere we went.

Those folks know how to give, and they did. They gave their all, cheerfully!

Let's turn in our hymnbook to No. 609 and sing a wonderful hymn about giving, "Take My Life."

*Take my life and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.
Take my moments and my days,
Let them flow in ceaseless praise,
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.*

*Take my hands and let them move
At the impulse of Thy love.
Take my feet and let them be
Swift and beautiful for Thee,
Swift and beautiful for Thee.*

*Take my voice and let me sing,
Unto God my praise I bring.
Take my lips and let them be
Filled with messages from Thee,
Filled with messages from Thee.*

*Take my silver and my gold,
Not a mite would I withhold.
Take my intellect and use
Every power as Thou shalt choose,
Every power as Thou shalt choose.*