



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

January 13, 2019

"What's Your Mite?" - Hope Restored Series

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**M**ark 12:41-44 - *Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling his disciples to Him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."*

As one person said to me when I read this Scripture out loud in a staff meeting, "Gee, it's scary to think that Jesus was actually watching people put money in the offering." My response was, "It's scary to think that He still does that today."

Don't worry, this will not be a sermon on guilt or encouraging everyone to give more because Jesus is watching you.

As this is my first sermon of the year, it is normally my State of the Union—or my State of the Church—address, a message on what I want us to focus on in 2019. I want us to focus on our hearts and God's heart.

In our reading, Jesus said that one woman, a widow, put

everything she had in the offering plate. She was completely all in for God. She was completely involved in faith. She was fully committed and devoted to the Lord. She gave to God more than all the others that day, even though she only gave two coins worth maybe a penny.

Can you imagine that day? Jesus and the disciples are watching people put money into the offering bin. Some put in just bunches of coins and you hear them clinking and clanging into the box. And others do the same thing, pour in their currency with great sound—ching...chang... chung. That's the sound of coins, not Chinese names. If they were Chinese people there, you wouldn't hear a single clink. Just kidding.

But imagine there is this waterfall, this continual avalanche of coins from people, from this giver and that donor, but then comes this woman who puts in just two coins and Jesus gets all excited and says to His disciples, "Did you see that? Right there! That woman gave more than anyone else today because she gave all that she had. She sacrificially gave!"

It is because of this passage, where the donor who gives just

two coins may be the biggest giver in our church, that our church decided to never list the amounts donors give, as some nonprofits and churches do. It's because we don't know who are the biggest sacrificial givers in God's eyes.

Since we have about 150 new people joining our church each year, I want to say again that I, as your Pastor, don't know how much you give or how much other people give. Only our bookkeeper does.

You know how, with some nonprofits, you look at their annual reports or at their fundraising events or newsletters and they list all of their donors? They even have different categories depending on how much you give using some kind of metaphor.

Using an animal theme, if you give \$50,000 or more, you are in the Lion category. Or, if you give \$20,000 or more, you are in the Tiger category. But if you only gave \$25, you are in the Chihuahua category.

Using a floral theme, if you are the top giver, you are in the ilima level with maile intertwined. And if you are in the next highest level, you are pikake. But if you just give 10 bucks, you are in the plumeria level.

**B**ut with Jesus you never know who the top donor is because He is not just looking at the amount. He is also looking at the heart and the amount of sacrifice or true devotion to God.

How does one become like this woman who gave everything she had for God in such a way that it impressed and pleased and honored Jesus Himself? And even though she only gave two pennies, in Jesus' eyes, she actually was in the ilima level or the lioness level.

We learn several things about this passage. The first is this:

The more we realize our weakness, the more our intimacy and trust in God can grow.

Generosity, sacrificial devotion to God, starts off with the realization that we need God.

What is a widow like in first-century Israel? In most cases, she is dirt poor. Without a husband or a successful son, she is poor, vulnerable, weak. It would sound like she would not have much hope nor could ever have any hope restored. But she knew she had one person in her corner. God.

We need to know we are weak without God, but strong with Him. We never get really all in to Jesus unless we know we are weak without God. Unless we really know that any piece of bread or drink we have comes from God and not from our own talent, we will never be close to God.

That's why it is important to always say a prayer of thanks before we eat at home or in a restaurant. We call it "saying grace before we eat." It's a check in our spirit and remember it's by grace we have food, not because we made it or deserve it.

Many of you who have so-called "made it in this world," made it because of a God-given opportunity that you didn't create.

You were born into a country that gives you opportunity.

You live in a state with clean water, clean food, clean air, and safety.

You have free public education. Great health care.

Some of you have had the opportunity to attend private schools or universities.

You have an abundance of food.

Plus an environment that helps you succeed in life, an environment—think about it—that you did not create, but inherited.

When you know that you came into this world poor, but that, by grace, you were given all of these blessings, in one of the greatest states and countries in the world, then hopefully you will be propelled, compelled to understanding why we must be all in for God, for all that we have is from God.

We are weak and vulnerable without God's grace in our lives, but not just materially. We are also flawed spiritually. Too often we act in ways that show we are sinful. We are selfish. We are self-centered. If we look at corporations, governments, it's a battle to keep things moral and altruistic.

Without God to teach us how to love and live, to give us supernatural love to love the unlovable, we are lost.

But the question is, when we realize that God blesses us in our poverty of spirit or in wealth, what are you going to do with all of those blessings? The theme throughout the whole Bible is "we are blessed to be a blessing."

You often hear the phrase that politicians are public servants, but in reality we should all be public servants. Whether you work in law or in business or in education, we are all public servants—blessed to be a blessing.

We should always be generous as the widow in this story and we can be generous because God has been so generous with us.

To affirm you all, you have already been incredibly generous in many ways.

We are one of the top church blood donors in the state.

We are traditionally the top giver in the state every year in the Give Aloha Campaign through Foodland.

We just raised all of the \$547,000 needed to build our new satellite campus in Kakaako plus an additional \$40,000, which I am sure we can use.

We have supported more than 1,200 children in poverty through Compassion International.

We have two teams in Cambodia right now who paid their own way to combat evil by helping children rescued from sex trafficking and to encourage the staff that ministers to them.

We have served and helped hundreds of people through the GriefShare and Divorce Care support groups.

**W**e have built five houses from the ground up for the houseless.

We furnished a Ronald McDonald lobby at Kapiolani Hospital. Well done, First Prez.

But it is when we feel that poverty of spirit that we need to know that God is in our corner. Jesus said He is all for us when we hit those seasons of sufferings, but now comes a second thing we can learn from the passage.

We need to have Jesus in the core of our lives.

The challenge of this story of the widow is that when it comes to generosity, when it comes to being all in for Christ, it means that we allow Jesus to enter into our core.

Some people give money out of what is called the margin, which is that part of us where, when we give, it may not feel that much of a sacrifice.

The core is the part that, if we touch that, it would be a real sacrifice of our essence.

If Bill Gates would give one million dollars a year, that is coming from his margin. It's not really sacrificing or touching his core. He's a billionaire. A million means nothing to him.

But the widow gave out of her core. It was a real sacrifice that could affect her present and future.

Here is how author Tim Keller describes the widow in this story: "She put in everything. She put in her whole life. She gave her life away. What is Jesus saying? I know what he's saying. When the rich give—in fact, let's be honest—when we give, we always give out of our margin. In other words, we only

give money, because when the gift is done, are we eating any less than before the gift? Are we dressing any worse after we've made a gift? Oh, we don't give that much. We give out of our margin. Are we traveling any less? Oh no, we don't give so much as to actually cut into our lives. We just give money, but she didn't. Jesus said when this woman put in her last discretionary cash, what she was doing was she was taking food out of her own mouth. Oh, more than that. She was giving up what little control she had of her life.

See, when the rest of us give, we only give what we can afford to give without losing any control over anything. We do everything we wanted to do before, but when she gave, she didn't just give her money; she gave her life, because she lost control." (Tim Keller, from "Jesus Versus" sermon, August 27, 2006) The words of Tim Keller.

Is it possible that we are not allowing our core to be touched by Jesus? Are we wanting control?

What's our mite? What is our mite that we may be holding on to and not wanting to give to Jesus? Our pride? Career? Anxiety of the future? The need to forgive someone or to receive forgiveness from God? Or control because we think we know better how to run our lives than by God's principles in the Bible?

Can we admit that we need spiritual help and we can't do life on our own power and that we need God? There should be no shame in admitting that we need help. We all need equipping and training to be more spiritually rehabilitated. All of us.

I try to go to an exercise place two to three times a week.

Everyone there is for physical therapy, physical rehabilitation. They admit by signing up and giving money and carving out time that they need help to make weaker bodies stronger.

There are teenagers there and young adults and older adults. There are soccer players, volleyball players, skiers, even some who are in archery. Really? Archery?

People are actively lifting weights, stretching, lunging, running on treadmills, leaning on walls, lifting balls, lifting balls, or lying on balls, to get kinks out of their muscles. There is no tussle to do what needs to be done. There is no strolling as they are foam rolling, watching the fat molting, to get going, and some seem like rowing as they are stretching to fetching some strength to put more length in their movements in their backs so that there may not be more attacks from the sprains and pains or the arthritis that bites us and fights us. Exercise is not a bad rap.

And to help you, they got trainers and nutrition experts with degrees and credentials I've never heard of, like MS, ATC, CSCS, CISSN.

Going to that exercise therapy is, for me, a metaphor of a healthy church. Similar to what we have here.

Here, our church staff also has more degrees than what we know to do with to help you. They have degrees in ministry, communication, tourism and hospitality, philosophy, counseling, law, social work, engineering, education, and the two most helpful degrees—filmmaking and biochemical pharmacology (figure out who on staff that is).

This is not a place where the staff are physical therapists, but are trained spiritual therapists to help you.

Church should be a place where everyone admits they have a weakness that needs strengthening. It's a place where people admit they are not perfect and need help to improve in exercising their faith, strengthening their walk with Jesus. Doesn't matter if you are a child, a teenager, or a senior.

In that sense, this place should reek of humility, a humility that says, "I need help. I am weak. I need to get stronger." That's the church.

And we are training people towards our church's vision and mission statement to love God, love people and reach the world for Jesus, and to help people find their destiny in Christ.

Do that. Make that the core of your life and not just the margin, and you, says Jesus, will lead a fulfilled, abundant life.

Your admission card is to say, "I need help. I give up control."

I remember a friend of mine said "I can't go to church. Lightning would hit me. I'm a sinner. I'm not like all those good people who go there." I told him that if you think you are a sinner, that is your admission card that qualifies you to come to church.

Church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints.

If you have fallen into temptation, if you have blown it morally, if you are insecure, worried, full of anxiety, need help, more faith and hope, that's who we are. Authentically broken, confused at times, poor in spirit, hungry for

love, feeling like a stranger in our own land. Blown it morally? Then, welcome to the party. That's church.

When you know that Mary Magdalene was a woman who had to struggle with seven demons inside of her, but got to be in the inner circle with Jesus and was the first person God chose to witness the resurrected Christ, you know church is an exciting place to be.

If you are waiting for some day when factually all your questions about God and Jesus will be answered and THEN you will follow Him, know that day will ever come when you will have a tight foolproof case to follow Jesus.

The way to know Jesus is to just say "I need help and I'm here to spiritually exercise."

I need spiritual therapy because the ACL of my soul is torn. I need Jesus because the truth is I will never have the wisdom or the strength or the morality to make it in this world without a higher power and that higher power is named Jesus.

You know as an aside, in a month on February 9, is our New Members' Class which we call Seekers and Joiners—Seekers for those who just want to seek and know more about the church, its vision, and Joiners for those who decide to join the church.

May I suggest for some of you, a first step to going all in for Jesus is to be committed to a community and consider joining a church.

What's the benefit of joining a church in a society that tends to run from joining?

It's because making a promise to be part of a community is the

start of learning what it means to be all in, to be humble and that it is not all about you.

By making a covenant, we learn what it means to be a partner to say I have your back; will you have mine?

Not exactly a marriage, but like it—we are making a promise to say in sickness or in health, in sorrow or in joy, in want or in plenty, I will stand by you.

And together—yes, together—we will learn what it means to go all in for Christ and to feel His presence and learn how to talk to Him, trust Him, hear His voice.

It's in the Saturday New Members' Class that we hear the vision of the church, my pastoral heart of where we would like to go, why we do things and when we do things. It's like an all-access pass behind the scenes.

It's also a time where we see that, rather than just be consumers, we formally want to become a community that gives and receives.

And when I say what you receive is not that members get a discount playing golf here, which is true. And that they do not get charged for use of the facilities for things like funerals, which is true. I am talking about the blessings received as being part of a committed community that is a team committed to help each other and this community as we seek God together.

And so what is our mite that we need to give over to Jesus, to say I'm all in—our money, time, our talents—that we would rather use for our own career, family, school work or our hobbies?

**W**e will never have the all-in faith of the widow unless we decide to trust Jesus.

I know contemporary society normally looks down on such faith. They might even think the widow has blind faith. But it's really all about control.

Again, I like what Tim Keller says about this passage where he says, "The secular person says, 'I will decide what is right or wrong for me. Nobody can tell me what the truth is. I determine my own truth,' and the religious person says, 'Oh, I'm going to obey God's rules so that he will take me to heaven, and bless me.' That's different. No it's not different, because neither of them is trusting; neither of them is giving up any control at all.

The religious person is trying to control God through the morality, saying, 'You can't just let anything happen to me. I'm a good person!' The secular person is trying to control his or her life by saying, 'I don't want to have anything to do with God.' Basically, they're scared; they're chicken. [Tim Keller is so bold as to say] They're spiritual chickens. They're cowards. They're both cowards. They don't have what this widow had, which was spiritual bravery, and therefore, love." (Ibid. Keller)

Spiritual bravery of a widow.

I end this message wanting to tell of a real widow in our church—Alice Yoder.

Alice, for decades, was our Clerk of Session, meaning the recorder of the minutes of our Board of Elders.

She was in her nineties when she passed away last year. She was one of the most faithful people I know.

Years ago, when her husband Paul died, she was so sad. They did everything together. She felt so alone. They had been married nearly 58 years. The grieving was great, as you can imagine. No immediate family lived here, though she did have close friends from our church.

But one day she said to me with great joy, "I am going to be okay Dan. I found this Bible verse. I won't be alone."

And she read me this verse from a book in the Bible called Isaiah:

**Isaiah 54:5** - *For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is His name; the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth He is called.*

She said, "Dan, God is my husband! He will take care of me."

This is also a good word for those of you who are divorcees, as well as widows.

Our maturity of faith is in direct proportion to our realizing we need God.

In her weakness, Alice trusted God with all of her heart, soul, and mind which was what we were told in last week's passage is the mark of spiritual maturity—can we love God with all of our heart, soul and mind?

We won't if we think we can do everything in this life on our own skills and gifts. A faith in God means we admit we can't do it on our power.

I admire Alice Yoder greatly. Many of us admire her and grieved greatly when she passed away last year.

Up until recently, 94-year-old Alice would go to Kenya almost every year, raising money to dig a well or to get more modern medical equipment for a hospital there. She would ride roller coasters. She would go on Mainland trips with the leaders of the church.

And we can say I can't be like Alice, the widow. She seemed super human. But Alice was human like the rest of us. Had the same worries and anxieties as the rest of us.

But she did a lot of small things in faith. And, in essence, the widow in our Bible story might not have thought she did a big thing; she did a small thing in her mind—just two copper coins. But she did it in faith.

Alice would do seemingly small things in faith.

She made crafts for our bazaar. She made mango chutney. She volunteered at the receptionist desk. Many years ago, she did Vacation Bible School at the church when we didn't have enough volunteers. She would serve pizza and peanut butter sandwiches at WAKO. Every year at the HIM Conference, she sat a table during all three days making sure the hosts and hostesses got their packets for the seminars. She would show up every Sunday morning at 7 am before the first service just to pray with the preacher.

So you may think, "Oh, the moral of the story is that Dan wants us to give piles of money." If you want to do that, please do! We have a big vision.

No, the 2019 State of the Church Address is saying this one thing.

**T**he moral of the story is to do good works out of faith and, though they may seem small to you, they can be huge in God's eyes, for God looks at the world differently.

The widow in our Bible story did what she may have thought was a small thing—just two pennies compared to what everyone else was doing all around her. But to Jesus, it was no small thing.

Have you ever done a small thing only to learn later that it was a big thing?

Last week, I got a letter from Alice Yoder's daughter. Inside were many letters that I had written to Alice. I would write her a letter every year just to affirm her. A simple letter or card. And to my surprise, she kept all of them. Her daughters found them after she died and returned them to me last week saying that "Alice kept a file of letters that meant a lot to her and many were from you."

I had no idea of the impact of a small thing—a letter, a card once a year to the clerk of our board.

You know, sometimes we think, "Maybe if I give a lot to God, He will love me more." In that sense, we set up a transactional relationship with God. If I work hard, if I give more, then I will receive His love.

But that is missing the point of this story.

God has already given His heart to you and even if you never ever give Him anything in return, He would still immensely love you.

Your purpose in life is not to earn His love or earn your worth, but it is that you are already of great worth as you are incredibly

valuable and God loves you with all of His heart already.

When you know that, maybe you will give all of the mites in your life, give up all of your control to God who loves you.

You think the THINGS of this world—the currency, material things—are important? They actually melt into the background in the face of God's amazing, crazy love.

The secret of this passage is this: The widow gave away all her coins because she knew she already had everything.

God doesn't need your money. He could instantly multiply the world's wealth with just a snap of His fingers. He doesn't want your money. More than anything, He wants the core of your life—your heart.

One of the last things Alice said to me before she died, was after we had said we loved each other. I had asked her if there were any last words for the church to know from her and she said just two words: "Trust God."

For as you trust God more, you give Him your heart.

We can only trust God when we know two things.

The widow in our story intuited that, in following Jesus, she knew He is the One that was not only in her corner, but that He would give His life for her. And that is what He did, for her and for us.

Just as the widow put everything in for Jesus, know today that Jesus put in everything for us. For it was Jesus who gave His life for us. He literally sacrificed His

life through a horrible, painful death so that we would not have the pain of being separated from God.

His one life was worth more than two pennies. His life was the most precious life in the universe, for He was the son of God. But He gave it all up for us, was tortured and died because He loved us. He stands in our corner and today He calls us to stand with Him in His corner.

Maybe these would have been the words of the widow and maybe they can be our words as we just read them, or mouth them, or sing them.

You're my constant; in the chaos  
You're my compass;  
when the road is long  
You're my portion; never failing  
For me, only Jesus

Let my heart want for nothing  
But You, just You  
Let my heart want for nothing  
But You, just You  
The riches of this world  
Could never satisfy  
Let my heart want for only You

You're my center; should I wander  
You're my future;  
and You redeem my past  
Every moment; and then forever  
For me, only Jesus  
For me, only Jesus

Let my heart want for nothing  
But You, just You  
Let my heart want for nothing  
But You, just You  
The riches of this world  
Could never satisfy  
Let my heart want for only You  
Oh Jesus

Let my heart want for only You  
For me, only Jesus  
For me, only Jesus