

GIVING BACK TO GOD (Mk 12:38-44)

Boudreaux was asking his grandson, TeeBoo, what he was going to be for Halloween. TeeBoo said, "Ah'm gonna be God." Boudreaux jumped back and said, "Mais, why you gonna do dat? Nobody ever seen God before." TeeBoo said, "Well, ah figure everybody like God and maybe ah get a tenth of all dere candy." Before I begin this homily, let me put your minds at ease. I will not be asking for any money, nor will I solicit any donations for any cause whatsoever. So, just sit back and relax --- but don't fall asleep.

Today's gospel presents us with a dilemma that most of us would rather not think about or have to answer: how much do I give back to God. Jesus seems to think that we are to give everything we have to God. But that just doesn't seem to be realistic, we reason, so we only give what we feel "comfortable" giving. We reason that we have our own needs and cares that no one else will take care of if we don't. And, that is very valid reasoning according to the world's standards. Mary recalls hearing on one of the daily talk shows that a study was done on peoples' giving. The results of the study revealed that the more that people have, the less they give, and the less that people have, the more they give. Obviously, we are speaking in terms of relative giving as a percentage of what people have. Take, for instance, the people in today's gospel: the widow's two coins will not go very far in providing for the upkeep of the temple but it was everything she had, whereas the bigger donations of the wealthy will do much more for the temple's maintenance but represented only a small part of their wealth. Jesus' observations have nothing to do with the amount which one gives but rather have everything to do with the heart with which one gives. Giving from the heart begins with an attitude of gratitude, rather than an attitude of scarcity and of want.

Jesus knew, that in the lives of many of us, our money ends up controlling us rather than us controlling it. We let it rule our lives to the point that it becomes the heart of all of our concerns and our motivation for acting as we do. It doesn't matter if we are the lender or the debtor, money is the chief link with the world around us. Money is a house and a car and clothing and food and medical care and leisure activities and some measure of security for our families. Money is freedom; money is mobility; money is prestige; money is many, many things that are important to us. But Jesus knew that money can be our undoing when it becomes the love of our life. As Jesus said, "You cannot serve both God and money." However, Jesus also said that money can bring us into a closer relationship with God. The very same money, the very same material things that could separate us from God, could bring us closer to God.

A young man approached his girl friend's father and said, "Sir, there's something important that I would like to ask you. I was, uh, wondering whether, er,

uh, ... that is, I was thinking you might be, uh, willing to, well, er, ..." The father grabbed the young man's hand and started shaking it enthusiastically. "Of course, my boy," he said eagerly, "certainly, I'll give you my permission. My daughter's happiness is all that matters to me in the world!" The young man was completely puzzled. "Permission?" he said. "Oh, that's not it, sir. It's nothing like that. You see, my car payment was due last week and I didn't have the money. I was wondering if you would lend me \$200." The father snapped back, "Certainly not, young man! I hardly know you!"¹

"Cirrhosis of the Giver" is an acute condition that renders the patient's hands immobile when he or she is called upon to move them in the direction of his wallet or her purse, and from there to the collection basket. Curiously, this strange disease is not clinically observable in such surroundings as supermarkets, shopping malls, entertainment centers, sports arenas or fancy restaurants. Moreover, statistics do show that a high percentage of those with the disease can be categorized as "regular church goers." Although a remedy is often prescribed which informs the patient that income tax deductions may be claimed for giving, nevertheless the best therapy which leads to a lasting cure is to get the patient's heart right with God. It has been determined that "Cirrhosis of the Giver" is a symptom of a basic need of the soul.¹

The people of St. Philip's are generous people. Ten years ago when we ran a campaign to build the Youth Center, the plan allowed for nine months to raise the money. But through the generosity of our community, we exceeded the goal in only three months. When the Diocese ran the capital campaign Our Faith, Our Family, Our Future, the people of St. Philip's nearly doubled the goal set out for us. The weekly contributions provide the resources needed to run the many, many ministries which our parish provides, and we are an extremely active parish. And so much more could be done if that generosity were spread over all of the registered members of our parish family. For, you see, in actuality, with as much as is done here, less than 25% of the people support the whole of the parish activities.

John Bunyan, author of The Pilgrim's Progress, wrote:

"A man there was and they called him mad:
the more he gave, he more he had."

To the world such a principle of giving is nonsense. To the Christian who knows the true worth of spiritual returns, it not only makes sense, it makes life ever more meaningful.

At the end of today's reading we hear Jesus say, "She, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood." In Mark's gospel today the reading takes place in the middle of Holy Week. A couple of days from now, Jesus himself will give his whole life on the cross. Jesus turns our attention to the woman because, when she opens up her hand and the two coins slip out, she

has given away her life. In the same way, on the cross Jesus opens up his own hands and life slips from them. Her giving is total, just as, on the cross, Jesus will give completely of himself. In her and in our Lord we see that the kingdom of God is found not when people hold on tight to their wallets and purses, not in holding on to what we have, but in letting go. As Jesus said, "Those who want to save their life will lose it. And those who lose their life for my sake and the gospel will find it."²

The dilemma of how much to give back to God might be summed up in this way. When I stand before God, He will ask me to show Him my hands. Will my hands still be closed, unwilling to let go of the things of this world? Or will they be open like the hands of the widow, like the hands of Jesus, having given everything back to God?

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¹ Some material for this homily was taken from various homilies provided by Sunday Sermons and Sermon Warehouse, Copyright 2009, Harmony House Publishing, LLC.

² Mark Strobel, "Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time (Cycle B)"; Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, Collegeville, MN