

THE UNSEEN GIFT

Mark 12:38-44

November 8, 2009

(Proper 27, Yr B)

So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

There were a couple of kids who didn't want to be seen. Some people *want* to be noticed, mind you. They actually want people to see them and be impressed. Like the scribes and the Pharisees at the marketplace, says Jesus ... who wear their long, fancy robes to make sure people see them. And they pray prayers as long as your arm, he said, with big, long words to impress other people. Oh, they want to be seen. But these kids

weren't like that. They didn't want anybody to see them.

And ... they hadn't been here too long, mind you. Their family moved here back in the spring from New York or Boston, I think – somewhere up North. Morgantown, maybe ... I'm not sure where it was. And I'm not sure why they came *here*, really. They didn't know anyone here. No friends or family here that they knew of, I mean. Not even a cousin. They'd heard about West Virginia, of course. But that was about it. So when they moved here they became like strangers, in a way. Strangers living in a faraway land. Away from their family and all of their friends.

So they decided to try to get to know some of the people in the neighborhood. So they decided to host a dinner party, a potluck supper, for a few of their neighbors. Nothing fancy, mind you. Just a meal and a chance to get to know one another.

So they made some calls. And they got everything ready. And it was a *wonderful* evening. Warm and friendly and lighthearted. And they knew right away

they'd all be friends. Good neighbors. Just good people, I think. It made them feel right at home.

And there in the dining room, as they sat breaking bread together, enjoying a lovely evening, the kids -- a wee little boy and his wee little sister -- tiptoed into the dining room. Nude. Naked. Blood stark "neck-ed," as my grandmother would say. They just walked into the dining room, as serious as could be. And they tip-toed all the way round the dining room table in nothing but their birthday suits! And their poor parents were shocked. Just mortified at first. And then they were *really* embarrassed. So embarrassed that they pretended not to see them, as if nothing unusual was happening there. And their guests were embarrassed, too -- they were embarrassed for *them*, I think. So they just went right along with them. Kept the conversation going, as if they didn't see the little naked people circling around them.

And in the mean-time, the little boy and his sister walked on their tippy-toes all the way around the table and through the door and out of the room just as quiet as could be -- like two little naked church mice. And no

one at the table made a sound. And when the children left the room, there was something like a collective sigh. They all just exhaled and tried to stifle their giggles. ✘ And then they heard a voice from the kitchen. The voice of a wee little boy who was speaking to his wee little sister. And the voice said, "See! Mommy was right! It *is* vanishing cream!"

It reminds me of some people who invited the little boy who lived next door to go to church with them, one Sunday. He was a little on the naughty side, mind you -- which may be why they thought he needed to be in church. I don't know. I mean, all I know is that this kid had two sisters and one brother, but *he* was the only one they invited to church!

So, the boy's mother dressed him up in his Sunday best, slicked his hair back with a comb, made sure his fingernails were clean, and even buttoned his collar and put a tie on the poor kid! Looked like he stepped right out of the old "Leave It to Beaver" show on TV. Oh, and she gave him a dollar bill to put in his pocket. And she said, "That's your offering?"

"That's my what?" he said.

“Your offering... Give it to Jesus when they pass the offering plate around.” So... off went Johnny with the neighbors to church.

A few hours later, Johnny showed up at home licking an enormous ice cream cone. And his mom was thrilled to see him. She knelt down and said, “Where did you get the ice cream?” Well, she knew the answer, of course. It was the neighbors. Those kind and wonderful people next door stopped and got him an ice cream cone after church. But that *wasn't* the answer. Johnny said, “I bought it.”

“You bought it?” she said. “What did you buy it with?”

“With that money you gave me,” he said without even a hint of worry or dread.

And his mom was not happy. “Johnny,” she said. “I told you to give that money to Jesus!”

And Johnny looked up with an innocent, almost angelic look on his face and said, “Oh, I know. But Jesus wasn't there. I looked in every pew, but I didn't see Jesus anywhere!”

So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Well ... that's what this story in the twelfth chapter of Mark is about. It's about people being seen and unseen, I think. And it's about giving and not giving, and keeping for ourselves what belongs to Someone else.

And it all happened, says Mark, when Jesus was in Jerusalem. It wasn't long until Passover, really. And Jesus was there in the courts of the temple one day. And he sat down and talked with some people who were there. Common, ordinary, everyday people. They wanted to know about God and God's ways and what God wanted from them. So Jesus taught them. And as he did he told them to watch out for people that like to be seen. The teachers of the law are like that, he

said. The *scribes* they called them. They love to parade around in the marketplace wearing their caps and gowns. Because they want people to know how important they are -- how holy and good, as if they know more about God than anyone else. And they love to pray in public and impress other people with the things that they say. They always have to have the best seats for themselves and let people see that they're really **somebody**. And all the while they're taking advantage of the poor and helpless people around them -- taking advantage of widows and people who have no one to help them.

And they were sitting across from the alms box, the temple treasury they called it. And he noticed how people were putting their offerings into the box. There were some pretty well-to-do folks at the temple. You could tell by the way they were dressed, I'm sure. And by the way they carried themselves with dignity and pride. And some of them were pretty generous, I think. People were putting some pretty big offerings into the box. Silver and gold. Big sums of money. Enough to help a lot of people, I'm sure. It was something to see. And they did. People could see them. Everybody could

see them. Kind of like having your name on the side of a building. The Bartholomew of Galilee center for the Performing Arts. Or the Josiah P. Ben Joseph Memorial Camel Derby.... Well, *kind of like that*, I suppose. But you get the picture. People were putting a lot of money in the offering that day. And the people who saw this were impressed.

But there's someone else making an offering that day. And no one sees. No one even notices, really. Until Jesus points her out. "Look," he says. "Do you see that woman?" She was common. An ordinary person. Not even average, really. It was plain to see that she was poor. She was a widow, you could tell by the way she was dressed. And in those days widows were often very poor. And if they didn't have sons or brothers or brothers-in-law who would take them in, they were on their own, really. They didn't have food stamps back then. They didn't have Social Security or Medicare or even a Secret Santa back then. They didn't have anything.

But there she was at the alms box. And they watched her walk up. And as she did she dropped two

coins in the box. They weren't silver or gold, mind you. Together they were worth a penny. That's all. Just a penny. You couldn't buy much with a penny back then. Taxes were so high a penny was nothing. What good would a penny do? All those rich people giving so much money that day, and along comes a woman poor as Job's turkey and she drops a penny in the box. People see something like that and they get a little embarrassed, don't they? You feel embarrassed for this poor woman. She should have kept that penny. God knows she needed it.

But Jesus said, "Look! Do you see that woman. I tell you, she gave more to the collection than all the others put together!" She put in more. Did you hear what he said? He didn't say she gave a bigger percentage than the others. He didn't say she made a bigger sacrifice. Or comparatively speaking No, Jesus said, "She put in more.... For they gave out of their surplus. But she gave out of her poverty. Everything she had. All she had to live on." Which means when she left there that day she had nothing left.... Or did she?

Think about all the rich people and all the money they gave. It was really impressive. Most of them were tithers, I think. People who gave a tenth (at least) of everything they had. Ten percent right off the top. Which would leave them with what? Ninety percent? A little less, a little more ... nobody knows, really, just how much they gave or how much they had left. But it's clear they had *something*. They had their *savings*. Something they could *count on*, mind you. Something they could bank on. (At least, that's what we like to think we have in our accounts.)

But what about the widow? She put it all in the offering. Everything she had. All she had to live on, said Jesus. And yet, she gave more. She had nothing left, she gave only a penny. And yet, she had more. Something unseen that would see her through the hard times in her life. Something unseen that she could depend on. Something she could count on. Something she could trust. Something no one else could see -- no one but Jesus, mind you -- that would provide for her needs the next day and the next and the next. It wasn't something anyone could see. But it was there. And it was real. And ... you know what it was. It was

her faith. When she put her penny into the treasury that day, she had **nothing** left. **Nothing ... but faith.** **She had faith in a God who keeps his word. She had faith in a God who provides. A God she could trust. And God can do more, so much more, with that kind of faith and a penny than he can with all the money in the world.**

Do you believe that?

When you place *your* tithes and offerings into the plate, what do you have left? Are you counting on your savings to see you through? The money that's left in your checking account? Or are you counting on something unseen? A God who always keeps his word? A God who provides. A God who sticks with us even in the hardest of times?

Preachers ask you for money. You know that, of course. Most of us don't like it. In fact, some of us hate it. But God tells us in the scriptures to do it. So we ask for your tithe. Your tenth. Your offerings for the Lord and his Church. But I'm not going to do that this morning. I'm going to ask you for *more*. I'm going to ask you to do what this poor widow did and give God

your trust. Give him your *faith.* Put your faith to *work* in your lives and in this church. **Give whatever it takes for you to put your hope, your confidence, your trust not in what's left over, mind you. Or what you can see that remains. But put your trust IN HIM...** Do *that...* and you will be amazed at the blessing, the *real* treasures God will pour out upon you and on his church.... ✠

A woman -- a stranger, I suppose -- showed up in church one Sunday with her two little boys. And they didn't fit, really. To be honest they looked out of place. Because the church was in a fairly wealthy neighborhood, really. Big houses. Nice cars. And the church was a beautiful, stately, rather expensive looking building. And *there* was this woman with her two children.

And after the service she asked to speak to the pastor. When he sat down with her she handed him thirty dollars and fifty-six cents. And she explained to him that this was her tithe. She'd been staying in a shelter for battered woman for several days, she said. And she had just decided to move south, away from

her family and friends. And away from her abusive husband. But before she went, she said, she wanted to ask the church to pray for her. And she wanted to give her tithe.

And the pastor told her he couldn't possibly take her money, that she should keep it for herself and her children. "God will understand," he said. And she looked at him with tears in her eyes and said, "You don't understand. Even if I *kept* that ten percent, I wouldn't have enough money to provide for my boys. So I want to give it to God. Because I trust God. I'm trusting that God will give me a new life. And to *show* him I trust him, I want to give my money."

I think she was right. God is a God we can trust even in the hardest of times. God is a God we can count on no matter what.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that?"

Then let's show him. Let's give him the unseen gifts of our hearts and our lives, our trust and our faith... Let's give him our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service. And let's **show** him we trust him and know

in our hearts that he will give us new life and enable us by his Holy Spirit to be the church for others -- a church that bears witness to love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

SOLI DEO GLORIA

BENEF. OBL. S. B.

