

**Models of Generosity in the Church**  
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Thankoffering Sunday, November 8, 2009  
Celebrating the Ministry of Women in the Church

Jesus could have chosen the equivalent of a Warren Buffet or a Bill Gates, billionaires who have given just about all their wealth to charity in efforts to help make our world work better. But instead, Jesus chose a poor widow, not just a woman who, sadly and tragically, was a widow, but a widow who was among the most vulnerable in the ancient world and, in this instance, also among the poorest in Jerusalem. Jesus was highlighting the difference between what we value and how God values, between what makes us rich among men and how we become rich before God, between superficial illusions of the good life that mislead and distract us as we try to find our way through life and the reality of blessed assurance, lasting satisfaction, the profound sense of being grounded in what's right, when we trust the Spirit's lead and align our lives with God's will and God's call.

When it comes to talking about widows as models of giving in the church, I will never forget the stewardship letter I once received (as a courtesy) from one of our colleagues in the Northeastern Ohio Synod, Pastor Dennis Mims. Many folks at Zion know of Dennis in the same way I did, as someone whose congregation was impressed by what he was doing in East Cleveland. Many were moved to support the ministry of St. James Lutheran Church as partners with annual pledges to donate to their work. If I remember correctly, choirs from St. James performed several times here at Zion before I arrived. Many of you will remember that Dennis was a dynamic speaker and an impressive pastor who did great things in East Cleveland for the church and community he served. The Northeastern Ohio Synod, along with his many congregational partners, provided most of the financial support that helped St. James survive and thrive; but Dennis also knew that his own members needed to own what God's grace and power was making possible. So, he encouraged them to give generously to assist in the support of their ministry.

As a courtesy, Dennis often sent copies of these stewardship letters to his partners. This one, in particular, thanked the older women of St. James, mostly widows living on Social Security, for their support, and encouraged them to tithe their month checks as a sign of their trust in God's goodness and gratitude for all God was doing through St. James. It's not as if he had singled out poor widows with his call to tithing. However, East Cleveland was jobs poor. Few had reliable incomes. These older women on Social Security were his most supportive members, members with the most reliable source of income in the community he served. They were not anonymous strangers, but his real, on-the-ground partners in ministry. They weren't offended by his honesty. On the contrary, they heard God's call and were honored to help. Still, the thought of praising poor widows living on Social Security for their generosity and encouraging them to do more, can leave us

feeling kind of uncomfortable. Their vulnerability, coupled with the burden of fighting off poverty, is a pretty high price to pay for paying the church's bills.

In my first call to ministry, straight from the ivory towers of touchdown Jesus at Notre Dame, my first encounter with widows on fixed incomes supporting the church almost lead me to change the title of my dissertation from *The Epistemological Significance of the Hermeneutical Community on the Theocentric Ethics of James Gustafson* to *the unbelievable generosity of Meta Schucht*. Meta was a widow in her late seventies, who never had children, and was living on the fixed income of Social Security, plus two pensions. She was not poor, but by no means was she a woman of means, just everyone's favorite Aunt Mae, who lived frugally, without any hint of extravagance, except in her generosity toward her family and in her support of the church. She inspired me to rethink my vision of generosity. She inspired us all to raise our sights when it came to giving.

Of course, what separated these widows living on fixed incomes in our world from the widow Jesus described is that his widow had no income. She wasn't living on the safety net; she was contributing to it. The Romans taxed their subject nations to provide for their own good. The Temple Treasury was the local institution that helped the poor struggling in their own community. So, everyone came to try to do their share according to their own sense of what they could offer. Like folks we know today, some who had more could often be critical of those who had less, feeling like everyone could do more to help themselves, thinking perhaps that they should limit what they gave so as not to encourage dependency. Whatever their thoughts and feelings, everyone passed by the Temple Treasury. Some came prepared, dressed for the occasion, with long speeches and large gifts. Others just happened upon the opportunity to contribute. Our widow was not there by accident. She had next to nothing; with no guarantees that even what little she had would be replaced once she gave it away. But as often happens when someone's life has been touched by God's grace, and our spirit is transformed by the sheer immensity of God's faithfulness, we can't close our eyes to the needs of others. Our hearts know the burdens they bear, and our wallets open up, even when all that's in them are two copper coins, worth no more than a penny, perhaps just enough for her next meal, but no more than that, and now no more at all, since with her giving to the Temple Treasury, all that she had to live on was now gone. Jesus had seen larger gifts, but none with bigger hearts, and none with a stronger trust in the goodness of God to provide for our needs.

Stewardship drives at Zion do not begin with pleas directed toward the plight of widows, although none of our members are excluded, and some are widows. The truth is that my stewardship letter was the lead article in this month's newsletter, where I recounted the unbelievable generosity that has characterized your support for the work of the church these past five years. In addition to supporting Operating Budgets of \$235,000 per year, with small surpluses each year, we have supported a series of property projects – like replacing the parsonage roof for an extra \$12,000; renovating the restrooms for an extra \$13,000; replacing the sound system for an extra \$20,000; renovations in the Sanctuary

for an extra \$30,000; a new HV/AC system for an extra \$60,000, and benevolence drives totaling more than \$40,000. All told, budgets in the black, and over \$175,000 in addition to that! On paper, it seems simply incredible. But I saw it and lived it. We lived it together. We gave it together over the course of the past five years.

Our job is not done, but it is time to move on. Dr. Mark Allan Powell's comments in the *News Page* have it exactly right in commenting on the meaning of our Gospel text. *"Financial stewardship is not only a matter of faithful giving but of faithful living. In response to the gospel, the Good News of God's Grace generously given in Jesus Christ, we submit our lives to the rule of God, to the Lordship of Christ, and to the direction of the Holy Spirit, so that we may be the people God wants us to be and have the lives God wants us to have."* I love the next line. *"Billionaire John D. Rockefeller was once asked, 'How much wealth does it take to satisfy a person?' He answered, 'just a little bit more.' Haven't we often said, 'If only we had more, we'd give more.' When I win that lottery.... But ask yourselves: 'How much is enough? How much do we need?'"* When will we realize that from Jesus' point of view, it isn't about how big our bank accounts are. It's always about how big our hearts are. It's always about learning to trust God's grace, to reach deep into our hearts and pull out the courage we need to say YES to Christ's call to join in the cause of God's kingdom and live in the reign of God's love.

Today is Thankoffering Sunday, which, as the name suggests, invites us to offer thanks for all that God has given, for all the blessings that have been ours throughout the course of our lives, and throughout the course of this past year. We've heard the message of faithful stewardship in many ways. *You can't outgive God!* – and that's true. *Don't give until it hurts; give until it feels good!* – and it will. Maybe it's a traditional hymn that inspires you. *"We give thee but thine own, whate'er the gift may be. All that we have is thine alone, a gift, O Lord, from thee."* [Lutheran Book of Worship, #410] However we say it, the challenge is the same. Unless we actually trust God's grace, we'll never know its strength. God is rich in mercy, rich in goodness, rich beyond measure with gifts of grace promised with the glorious inheritance that is already ours in Christ; but if we don't draw on the riches God has given, if we don't use the gifts that are ours, if we don't share the love that is in us, then what good can come of these great truths we say we believe?

Stewardship, someone once said, is everything we do after we say we believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Stewardship is the living that follows from our believing. What should we do with the things God has given us? I'm no Methodist, but I think John Wesley may have said it best: *"Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, for as long as you can."* Renown Quaker William Penn said it a bit more simply, *"Do good with what you have, or it will do you no good."* Do that, as Jesus said to the rich young man seeking true life, and you will know what it means to be rich before God, which is, after all, the point of our Gospel text, our hope in seeking true life, and the aim of all the prayers we offer ... in Jesus' name. Amen