

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 8, 2009, Pentecost 21, dedicated to Susan Sitler on our 24<sup>th</sup> anniversary, to Wayne Piper and the 2010 Stewardship Committee, and always to the glory of God!*

# **“Together As Stewards”**

## **Mark 12:38-44**

### **(Part IV of IV in the Stewardship series “Together”)**

Today is referred to by many names – Dedication Sunday, Celebration Sunday and Stewardship Sunday are but a few. In order to **celebrate** today, we need to **rededicate** our gifts and tithes to First Church for 2010. We all know that.

Having listened to Christopher Washington, Sarah Reed, John Deliman and Charlie and Michael Knerr (and family), we know that stewardship begins in our hearts and it is a reflection of our treasures given BACK to God. We have heard them say they are all stepping up to the challenge of giving in 2010. Before offering my reflections today, allow me to say that each day of the year, each Sunday of the year SHOULD be Stewardship Day, Stewardship Sunday. Each one of us should be a steward for the Lord when wake each day and serve God with gladness, returning with great thanksgiving all we have to the Lord! Let us step up today in our giving for 2010.

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Her name was Osceola McCarty. She was an African-American woman from Mississippi, who earned a living by washing and ironing other people's clothes. McCarty, who never married, was in the 6th grade when she had to leave school and take over her mother's laundry business while she cared for a sick aunt. "All my classmates had gone off and left me so I didn't go back," she said. "I just washed and ironed." She has never had a car. Only near the end of her life, at the urging of bank personnel, did she buy a window air conditioner for her home. McCarty's arthritis forced her to retire in December of 1994 at the age of 86. She died five years later at the age of 91.

Osceola scrimped and saved, however, until she was able to leave \$150,000 to the University of Southern Mississippi to set up scholarships for other needy African-American women. Contributions from more than 600 donors have added some \$330,000 to the original scholarship fund of \$150,000. Today the scholarship fund is over \$1 million.

After hearing of Miss McCarty's gift, Ted Turner, a multi-billionaire, gave away a billion dollars. He said, "If that little woman can give away everything she has, then I can give a billion."

"I want to help somebody's child go to college. I just want it to go to someone who will appreciate it and learn. I can't do everything, but I can do something to help somebody. I wish I could do more. But what I can do I will do!" Osceola said near the end of her life.

His name was John G. Wendel. John and his sisters were some of the most miserly people of all time. Although they had received a huge inheritance from their parents, they spent very little of it. They did all they could to keep their wealth for themselves.

John was able to influence five of his six sisters never to marry, and they lived in the same house in New York City for 50 years. When the last sister died in 1931, her estate was valued at more than \$100 million. Her only dress was one that she had made herself, and she

had worn it for 25 years.

The Wendels had such a compulsion to hold on to their possessions that they lived like paupers. Even worse, they were like the kind of person Jesus referred to “who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:21)

Osceola McCarty and John G. Wendel, each one a child of God.

The power of Osceola’s story is far reaching. Her influence opened the heart of a billionaire and changed the lives of many young women in the past eight years. The young women who have received her scholarships have stepped out to serve others – in the spirit of Osceola.

The power of John’s story is only remembered because the last of the Wendels died with a firm grip on their millions. They weren’t happy. They lived in a mental state of poverty and shared nothing.

Which one made a difference in this world? Which one emulated God? Which one was a steward for the Lord? Which one would you like to be remembered as, Osceola or John?

Before we arrive at today’s text in Mark 12, we already heard Jesus’ warning that the rich will have it hard at the entrance to the kingdom of heaven (remember – it’s like getting through the eye of a needle). As we step into this passage, Jesus praises the poor widow's offering, and makes it clear that the standard measurement for assessing gifts is not how much we give to the work of God or how much we put in the offering plate, but how much we have left for ourselves. Those who give out of their abundance still have abundance left. And that's a problem.

Can it really be that the poor are praised, that this widow is lifted up, because she gave every bit of money in her bank account? Is this what it takes to follow Jesus? Why this preference for poverty in Jesus' teaching? Doesn't it sometimes seem that Jesus is romanticizing and

idealizing the poor?

Surely the poor would be the first to object. Life in poverty is what we all want to avoid, not aspire to. No one dreams of growing up poor, of living from government check to government check, of digging through garbage cans or living in run-down apartments with no heat.

We need to remember, the woman at the temple was not a poor widow; she was poor because she was a widow. Mary Anderson writes in *The Christian Century* (2003):

“My understanding of sociology and economics in first-century Palestine tells me there was no such thing as a rich widow in that culture. Women were totally dependent on their male relatives for their livelihood. To be widowed meant not only losing someone you may have loved, but more tragically, it also meant that you were losing the one on whom you were totally dependent. Widows were forced to live off of the good graces of other male relatives and anyone in the community who might provide a meal here, a little money there.”

The two little coins in the woman's hand were probably all she had. The truth is – and the extremely poor know this well – those coins weren't going to change her life. When you've got so little, a penny or two isn't going to move you from welfare to work. She could be joyful in knowing she was able to give to the temple treasury, because with the coins or without them, she was still a dependent person.

Rich people can't say the same. My money gives me independence and freedom from living like a poor widow. I like it that way and my family likes it that way, so I will not be putting my entire paycheck in the offering plate on Sunday. But I've also seen poor homeless guests in worship who fill out an offering envelope and share the only dollar in their pocket or write a prayer from their heart as a gift toward God's work. When you're that low on the economic scale, giving isn't the problem, getting is.

The widow wasn't dependent on her money or her status in life;

she had none of these. She was dependent on God and her neighbor for everything. She didn't have two feet to stand on. She didn't have bootstraps to pull up. She was totally dependent – and that's what Jesus pulls out of her story like a pearl of great price. This is what we are to be like before God – dependent on nothing but the grace of God. We are to be people without any resources except the riches of God's mercy, love and grace.

The issue today is not how much we have in the bank, but what that money is for us. Is our money our heart, our security, our source of power like it was for John G. Wendel? Or is our heart our tool for our stewardship and sharing with others like Osceola McCarty? Are we dependent on our money to give us all we want and need from life, or are we dependent on God to make us rich?

“If you follow me,” Jesus teaches, “you will walk in the way of the widow.” Live lives that show in everything you do and say that you are dependent on God for all you have and all you are.

As good American Christians we've been taught to celebrate our independence, but Jesus teaches us to celebrate our great dependence on God alone. If independence is a sign of strength and success, how can we possibly rejoice in dependence?

Our culture counsels us to become like the honored scribes, but Jesus counsels us to become like the dishonored widow. We are to model our lives on one we would normally overlook, being too busy admiring the lifestyles of the rich and famous.

The widow tossed the only shred of independence she had into the offering plate, but she kept intact her complete dependence on God and neighbor. She is our spiritual mentor standing there on the margins of all we hold dear. Her way is a life of faith grounded in the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the communion of the Holy Spirit. It's a life lived in the conviction that we are stewards of all we have in our hands and our lives, not the owners of these things.

Where previously we connected dependence with oppression and depression, Jesus shows us that our dependence on God leads to joy and thanksgiving. If God is running the universe and ruling my life, I no longer have to save myself, prove myself or justify myself. I'm the work of God's hands. I rest and work in those hands and I shall die in those hands. To be free of those hands would be death to me, because in them is life abundant.

We give thanks for the widow's great witness. May we be as free as she is. (Drawn from Mary W. Anderson writing on Mark 12:38-44, *The Christian Century* 2003).

Today, we called upon to step up and make a commitment to this church for 2010. We are called to make a "witness" as stewards for God with our hearts, hands, feet and treasure. Depending on your heart and your attitude, this can be taken as burden or gratitude.

In Africa, our churches there report that people dance to the offering plates each week – several times each Sunday during the service. They step up, step out and have a party when they bring their tithe to God. I give a lot of money to multiple sources – for heat, light, mortgage, Dan's college, and other bills to pay. But, I never dance when I do! I have yet to dance when writing a check to AEP. Although I am not a good dancer, I like the dance of stewardship!

In wrapping up, I want to leave you with one more image related to stewardship. I feel like stewardship is as fundamental to living as how we wear our socks. That's right. I learned this from Coach John Wooden. Coach Wooden won 10 national basketball titles as the coach of UCLA from the 1950s to the 1980s. Any basketball player who was on the UCLA men's team in the late '60s or early '70s would have thought that he had arrived. There was no better team in the country. There was no better coach to play for than John Wooden. They were at the top of the college basketball world.

I'm sure the first day of practice was full of anticipation. How

would their coach set the tone for the long season to come? What inspiring words would he speak?

The upperclassmen knew what was coming. But first-year players were no doubt surprised by the initial lesson taught by their Hall of Fame coach. The first thing Wooden did every season was to show his players how to put on a pair of socks. He did not teach this lesson only once, but before every game and practice. Why was this so important?

John Wooden discovered many players didn't properly smooth out wrinkles in the socks around their heels and little toes. If left uncorrected, these wrinkles could cause blisters that could hamper their performance at crucial times during games. Many players thought the practice odd and laughed about it then. Wooden knows some of them still laugh about it today. But the coach would not compromise on this basic fundamental principle: "I stuck to it. I believed in that, and I insisted on it."

Great Disciples of Christ are great stewards. If you are among the great stewards of this church you know how to put on your socks! You know your discipleship includes the basic discipline of making good use of all the gifts of time, talent and money God gives us. Osceola McCarty knew how to put on her socks. Emulate this great woman of faith as you step forward with your stewardship commitment this year.

A few weeks ago, our assistant church treasurer, Nancy Fields said in a forum on stewardship, "I don't see that there is any other way we can make it in 2010 unless people increase their giving." So far, we have received gifts averaging \$2,700 per giving household. Today, we all need to be generous, happy givers. I am asking all of us to straighten our socks, and to step up and share more of our resources in 2010 for the mission and ministry of First Church. Thank you. Amen.

