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## “Giving Your All”

A sermon by Sam R. Miglarese

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1 Kings 17:10–16; Psalm 146; Romans 5:1–5; Mark 12:38–44

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Let me offer a word of thanks, a shout-out to individuals and committees of our congregation and the preached word. First, a word of thanks to all of you for your hospitality, for your e-mails and your concern as I hobble through these past six weeks, trying to be attentive to the mending of my foot. I broke it taking a shortcut to nowhere. Shortcuts are dangerous, and I advise you to beware of a hurried lifestyle.

Secondly, A shout-out to **Joe Harvard** and to **Chuck Wilson**. You may have read in the paper this morning that Joe was editorialized as one who is a tireless advocate for the bonds between faiths. And I congratulate him, but I congratulate you, because in so many ways, he represents all of us and the commitment of this community to build the bonds of unity between faiths that are different from us, as well as Christian faiths that share a common baptism. So congratulations to Joe and his advocacy on behalf of this congregation to the larger church and to the larger faith communities.

I would like to commend as well Chuck Wilson, because he also was quoted often this week in the paper because of his work with the non-profit organization Careers in Construction. In my work with Duke, we work closely with the CT Wilson Construction Company and others in their commitment in this great recession to provide jobs for those who need them the most. It’s a small effort but a genuine one. And because of their work with the Holton School in East Durham and because of the work with the New Horizons School in the Durham Central Park, I

commend him and his colleagues in the construction industry for making it possible for young people to take on meaningful work for their futures.

And thirdly, I want to give thanks to the Worship Planning Committee as well as our Stewardship Committee. I didn't have the chance to meet with the committees this week, but I want to make sure you understand that the first priority of this congregation is to prayer and worship. Kathy, Marilyn, and members of the committee, Peter Fish, and David Smith, bring together great resources to plan our Sunday worship. I am grateful to them and their generosity of commitment to make our Sunday mornings special.

A word of thanks to the Stewardship Committee. This is the season of generosity, and Walt Barron, Jody and Julie Maxwell, Jon Abels, Marilyn, and members of the staff have worked hard to develop a theme that captures this sense of good stewardship. Not a time to guilt trip you, not a time of laying on you a burden of "give until it hurts," but a real sense of what stewardship is all about. The love of God poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, that's the love that does not disappoint. And that is wherein our hope lies.

During this season of generosity, this season of stewardship, we have a conscious and intentional opportunity to reflect on the way in which we give graciously and the way in which we live our lives in gratitude. There is no better example of this than Jesus teaching His disciples about what it means to follow Him. As you listen over the course of the weeks to Jesus' encounters, His teachings, His miracles, He has one thought on His mind as He speaks and teaches to His disciples: the meaning of the cost of discipleship. Discipleship is just another word for stewardship. He speaks, as you recall some weeks ago, to his own disciples, who were coming to Him, and they have something they want, and He said, "Well, what do you want me to do for you?" And they said, "We want you to put us at your right hand and at your left because we see that you're the One who has come to save the world." And He basically says to them you've missed the point. You've missed the point. Discipleship means drinking from the cup. You are blinded by your ambitions.

And directly following that, you recall the story of Bartimæus, where Jesus encounters the blind man who can't see, but calls out anyway. What he knows is this Jesus is near, and he says to him, "I want to see!" after Jesus asks of him, "What do you want me to do for you?" And Jesus responds with the gift of sight; it is not just simply the gift of physical sight, but the gift of an eye of faith. This man sees for the first time that this man, Jesus, is of God, and he's willing to lay aside his cloak and all that holds him back to follow him along the way.

And today, very dramatically, we have all of the readings centered on this love of God poured out as it is exemplified in the life of widows. The first touching story from the book of Kings is about a widow and her single son, who are struggling during the famine. This famous drought was actually predicted by Elijah and even caused by him to teach the people a lesson. In the midst of this drought, Elijah goes and has the gall to ask this woman, who's preparing for her last supper before she dies, for water and food to eat. And in her sense of hospitality to the prophet that she wasn't sure whether he was a true prophet or a false prophet, she responded with generosity and with trust. She gave him water, and she gave him the last bit of meal and oil that she had saved for the last meal for her son. And the prophet responded with more than enough meal and oil for her days during the drought. But it was her gift of hospitality, her gift of responding with generosity to this rather demanding request of the prophet.

In another situation that you just heard, the famous story of the widow's mite that is used so often on stewardship Sundays, this widow had developed over a course of life a habit of generosity that was astounding. But for the first time, it was acknowledged, it was recognized, it was seen by someone who understood the cost of being a true disciple. After Jesus having all these discussions with the scribes, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees about the resurrection, about taxes and all sorts of things, he walks into the treasury in the temple for prayer and sees across the aisle that all these folks were giving money in the collection. And he noted to his disciples that the one who gave the least, the pitiful, miserable amount of money, less than a penny, actually was the truest giver of all. She gave it all. She held nothing back. She truly was a woman of generosity. And he invites us as disciples to follow that same model.

So what is the message then for us during this season of stewardship when we are asked to live openly and generously and graciously? I think it is an opportunity for us to reflect in our hearts and with our families the ways in which living graciously and giving generously should be a way of life, as it has been for those two widows.

For them it was not just a matter of a once-and-for-all event, it was not like all of a sudden the widow decided to give up her last store of food to feed the prophet. It was not as if the widow in the temple was giving her last bit of money as if she had never given before. I think the message is that stewardship and discipleship together are a discipline. Her life was a rehearsal for this graced moment when her gift is seen—recognized by the Christ. All she knew was dependence, gratitude and generosity. The widow lived her entire life as one of radical dependence on God and radical detachment from all else. Remember, she lost her husband, financial security, and social status and yet kept on giving.

And to the extent that we give and live generously and graciously, there will be moments in our life when we are going to be called upon to give when we are not sure we are capable of giving at all. Now, I do not think any one of us have lived the perfect life, the life happily ever after. We have all experienced pain and sorrow and loss: loss of our retirement funds in this recession, loss of our jobs, loss of our relationships, loss of our children's health, of our own health. And I'm telling you that in the midst of loss, whether we choose it or not, we are going to be called upon to give generously and to live graciously.

So I invite you to reflect on some questions that I formulated that I think would be helpful for us in light of these two stories about the widows.

First, how well are we practicing or rehearsing for the moment that will come upon us, unaware much in the same way that the widow was unaware of Jesus looking at her, observing her?

And what is our response to loss? Are we going to respond with being gracious, or are we going to respond with resentment and anger and holding everything to ourselves?

How well are we practicing trust, gratitude, and generosity, which is what stewardship is?

In whom do we place our trust?

How do we respond to those in need, like the widows and the orphans the Psalmist sung about shortly before?

These incisive questions are at the heart of stewardship. As you rejoice in the love of God that is poured out in your hearts by the Holy Spirit, I pray that your response will be as generous and as gracious as those two wonderful widows, models of discipleship for us. Amen.