

Have faith and trust that your giving will be blessed.

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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1 Kings 17:8-16, Psalm 146, Hebrews 9:23-28, Mark 12:38-44

I've said it before but I will say it again ... WELL DONE EVERYBODY!! What a day!! Thank you so much to you all. My heart has been overflowing with much joy and delight at the way this community works together. In my meetings and travels I hear of some other organizations and communities that simply do not have this degree of goodwill and fellowship. What a wonderful model and indeed icon of the Body of Christ in the world. What a wonderful example of selfless giving.

Of course this giving is not just about yesterday. During the week I see this all the time — how members of this congregation consistently give in terms of talents and skills, time, energy and money. People are wonderfully generous with their giving here from doing the flowers, to cleaning, gardening, polishing brass, buying liturgical supplies, attending meetings, reading reports, banking money, collecting money, manning op shops, emptying clothing bins, sorting clothes, feeding the needy, preaching, assisting in leading worship, playing music, singing music, to caring for each other, to caring for me, to organizing twilight fairs and manning the stalls, to cleaning up after it all and counting the takings and to giving of money—the list goes on and on.

For us at St Philip's the area of giving money is quite amazing at the moment. Parish Council have been greatly heartened and grateful for the way so many people have stepped up to the mark with pledges for our building project—plus the way other organizations have stepped up and supported us as well. This year we have had a 100% strike rate in terms of grant applications being successful. This translates into around \$100,000 for various projects in this year alone. Of course this money is not part of general running costs so please do not cancel your ADF debit or tear up those giving envelopes! But what this all seems to say to me is that we are in a springtime of abundance and growth. A time to lay down foundations for the future and be in a position to continue to be the church of God in this place into the future.

Talking about money and giving is always a little awkward for a rector. They know only too well that their stipend is made up of exclusively with money from the people in the congregation. Many people are surprised when I say that we receive no money for my stipend from any other source. There is no magic pudding of money in the diocesan offices. Also when the minister gets up to talk about money and giving they feel as if they are preaching to the well and truly converted. Which reminds me of what Martin Luther said: *People go through three conversions in the Christian faith: their head, their heart and their pocketbook.*

Interestingly enough Jesus never seems to have any problem bringing up the topic of money. In parables and teachings he addresses the issue of money frequently. Many times it is in terms of our attitude to money—whether we are attached to it or not as in the story of the rich young man or whether it is used for the kingdom of God as in the parable of the pearl of great price. In the case of today's readings it is about how much we give and why – what is in our hearts.

The two widows, the widow of Zarephath in the Kings reading and the widow in the parable from the Gospel respond to the call of God in their lives by giving all they had. Now the point of the stories is not that the widows impoverished themselves, they were impoverished already, but that poor as they were they put their hope in God. They trusted in God not in accumulating wealth. In stark contrast to these two widows, are the religious and political

leaders of the day who strove to accumulate wealth and put their hope in their efforts and in the wealth they had hoarded.

As Jesus teaches in the synagogue, he warns of these types of people, certain scribes who are the professional interpreters of the Law. They “walk around” ostentatiously, seeking honour in public places and prestige at synagogues and at banquets. In Jesus day scribes were often legal trustees of a widow’s estate and they charged exorbitantly for their services. The fee was usually a part of the estate, but some actually took the “widows’ houses”. Although they kept up an appearance of piety that is all it was, an appearance.

In contrast to the scribes the “poor widow” is held up by Jesus as an example of good discipleship. In the story Jesus is “opposite the treasury” possibly in the outer court of the Temple, where people placed their offerings in chests. The widow makes a real sacrifice in giving two *leptas*, the lowest value coin in circulation and they were all she had. She gave all she had. When you stop to think about it Jesus and the Widow were just alike. Remember, Jesus was on his way to the cross when he said these words. He and the widow both gave everything they had.

Does this mean we should give *everything* we have? Some of us are indeed called to that type of stewardship. I must admit I came back from my retreat—which was just wonderful by the way—inspired by the Rule of St Benedict and the words of Jesus in Luke’s gospel where he talks of giving up all your possessions. Momentarily, I wondered whether it was time to give it all away. Practicality, reality, a mortgage to pay, a place to live and food to eat then landed. Yet I think the point of the story for everyone is not how much we give but how we give it. Jesus is making a comparison between the scribes who looked holy and righteous but gave nothing of themselves and certainly very little of their wealth. Rather they took from others who could not afford. There was no real sacrifice in their giving and no real sign that they were moving into the Kingdom of God.

In comparison the poor widow, in a very quiet and humble way, gives what she has and it entails some real sacrifice. Giving in this way is only possible when we give through love and for a higher purpose. There is great trust and faith involved in this type of giving, trust and faith that dis-empowers any fear and reservations.

If you go back a little in this story you have a scribe asking Jesus: *which is the greatest commandment?* His agreement that to love God and to love one’s neighbour are the most important has led Jesus to tell him that he is almost ready for the kingdom of God.

This whole story of giving is put in the perspective of the great commandment that we read out most services: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength and you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

I was actually writing this sermon sitting in my office watching St. Philipians run backwards and forwards getting ready for the fair. Sometimes it is hard to remember why we are doing things at church. However there **is** a vision and a purpose to all this effort! The great commandment is our basis. Organizing, setting up and running a fair is about loving God and loving neighbours. It is about building a community, bit by bit, where the love of God is truly lives amongst ourselves.

A church community is a place where the love of God shown in the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is remembered, taught and lived out. We do that by coming together, giving thanks and praise, remembering in word and sacraments, caring for each other, the earth and others in our community and practicing forgiveness and reconciliation. My job is to lead and help in that process, a process to which I am deeply committed and in

which I believe strongly. At its best a church like this one can truly be a place of transformation, goodness and healing.

So another big THANK YOU to everyone for today's effort. As you are sitting there probably feeling exhausted remember the two widows in today's stories. They are held up as an example of selfless and holy giving and how that type of giving is blessed by God. Like the widows we are encouraged to trust in God, trust that our efforts will bring fruit and trust that what we are giving really is for a higher purpose—the love of God shown forth in the world. Amen.