

Next Sunday, we come to Pledge Sunday here at Pilgrim. How much do you give?

It is a question we will answer by marking on a pledge card of intent of support for the work of God through Pilgrim Congregational Church in 2007. It is a question that has as many answers as we have people in this room.

Jesus is at the temple. He sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people money into the treasury. Jesus sat down. That is an indication that a rabbi is about to teach. In the temple, there are 13 big receptacles, the openings shaped like trumpets where people placed offerings for the work of the temple. The boxes were something like "poor boxes" I have seen in churches. The offering was voluntarily and the amounts given were usually small. The shape of the offering boxes allowed for a loud clanging of metal on metal. It was a way of calling attention to gifts and encouraging others to give. I guess something like an auction where the auctioneer keeps trying to get people to bid higher. If you get caught up in the spirit of bidding, you pay way too much for an item. Our youth group at Trinity funded their summer mission trip with "A Meal and A Deal." The meal was food, prepared by parents, for a price of course, and the deal was the auction of items to raise funds needed for the summer project. It worked really well and made lots of money since the food and items in the auction were donated.

Jesus is watching the people put money in the treasury. One gift stirs him – it even moves him to exclamation. "Here is the real thing. This widow has given what was her next meal." Jesus has taught that denial and taking up the cross are important for those who would follow him. Here, he has the opportunity to use the gift of the widow to make his point again. This widow gave her two copper coins – probably two leptas – the smallest coin in the Jewish currency. They certainly made a very soft noise as they were inserted into the offering box. But Jesus heard this smallest noise. It the sight of God, it proves to be the best gift of all. Jesus is not speaking against the large gifts and condemning people for not giving more. And he is not romanticizing the small gift. Jesus made it blazingly clear – the gift that counts is the gift that costs. It is simply that true giving is to be measured by what is left, not just by the size of the gift.

That is one lesson I learned playing on our high school football team. We were called on to "Leave it all on the field." That meant that we were to give all our energy, focus all we could give toward winning the game. Our coach was very proud of us when we gave it our best and I have to say he would commend us – win or lose – when we gave our all. He would never refer to the score, if we won or lost, just the fact that we had done our best.

The widow's gift is not just in proportion to her means, there is something in her heart that lifted her gift into the realm of sacrifice.

She is from another country. She does speak English and is an American citizen. She has small children. And she struggles to have enough to feed, clothe, educate, and provide health care for herself and her children. She had prayed to God about this job she wanted. It was a job that paid better than her minimum wage and it would include health benefits for her children. She got the job. When the company asked employees to contribute to their initiative toward charity, she pledged one day of her salary each week. That is equal to 20 percent of her pay. Her friends were concerned that she was giving more than she could afford. So was the company she worked for. But she understood her giving as a commitment she had made to God. It was not a commitment to the church, it was a commitment to the charity work of her company. She had not looked at her pay check and listed what she needed and given out of what she would have left over.

In her mind, she and her family was much better off with this new job. She would keep her pledge to help others who would need her help.

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Sometimes we fall into the trap that what we have to offer is not much and that it really will not matter. What difference can my one penny make? What difference can my one vote make? Sometimes, we excuse ourselves by thinking what we have is so small that it does not count at all. "I really haven't a penny to spare, no one will notice if I drop something in or not." Jesus' recognition of the widow's gift knocks all that over. No gift, given in love is too small to count. No life can be excused from the grace and duty of sharing.

Who has supported the church throughout its history? I can tell you it is not the checks of the rich, but the 2 copper coins of the poor.

God spoke to Moses and told him to assume the leadership of the "Let My People Go Committee." Moses resisted. Moses did not believe he had what it took to lead the people to freedom from Egypt. "Lord, neither pharaoh nor the people will believe that you sent me." God asked Moses that all important question. "Moses, what is that in your hand?" Sheepishly, Moses answered, "Only my walking stick." God then ordered him to throw it down. When he did, the stick became a serpent. "Let them see this and they will believe."

God is still asking that question today. "Rosa Parks, what is in your hand?" "Well, God, it is just a bus ticket." "Really, Rosa Parks, what are you going to do with that bus ticket?" What are you going to do with what is in your hand.

God is still asking that question: "Voter, what is in your hand?" We answer, "Only a ballot." Well, with that ballot, we might stop a war, raise the minimum wage, save social security, modify health care.

God will ask that question of us this week and when we bring our pledge card next Sunday. "Pilgrim member, what is in your hand?" "It is just my pledge card." Really, just a pledge card. God is calling us to raise that voice of justice in our community. God is calling us to proclaim our open and affirming stance toward all. God is calling us to speak for and work with the poor.

God is calling us to believe that this still speaking voice of God can be heard through Pilgrim Congregational Church in our own community. God is calling us to be welcoming, to stretch forth our hand with the same unconditional love that we know from God. It may just be a pledge card, something we do every year the Sunday before Thanksgiving. I say it is the sound of the Spirit of God among us as we dare place our pledges to the work of God in our own day.

"Look at her, this poor widow. She has given her next meal to the work of God." As we sign our pledge cards and bring them, it is much more than just a pledge card. It is a sacred offering to God. And it will be acceptable in the sight of God. And God will use us and our gifts to speak in our own day.