

“How Much is a Nickel Worth?”

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Text: Mark 12: 41 – 44

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A number of years ago I was walking down a street in Chicago and I spied a \$1 bill on the ground. Impressed by my luck I bent down to retrieve it when the bill suddenly moved a couple of feet. So I took another step and bent down to grab the dollar, and it moved again! This time I looked up. I was standing before a fire station, and sitting in front was a fireman holding a fishing pole. It turns out I had gone for his bait and the fireman caught a big one – me. So I now know a dollar is enough to make me stop and stoop. But would we stop for a quarter... a dime... for a lowly nickel? Perhaps not a nickel. After all, what does a nickel get us? In my childhood I could buy 15 small candies with one, so at the age of 5 I could feel rich with a nickel. Not today. Many of us have jars full of them because we don't want to lug them around. They aren't even worth our time to roll up and return to the bank. They seem to be worth so little. Imagine the reaction from your waiter at a restaurant if she saw you leave a five cent tip! Or gave a nickel to the canvasser for the Cancer Society.

So imagine the reaction to a woman giving a penny to God. A wealthy person might think her gift worthless. A temple priest might think it inconsequential. The smug might think it a disgrace. But Jesus saw something different. He was not looking at *what* she gave but *why* she gave. She was recognized as a “poor widow”. Poverty was typical for widows in that day because the welfare of women basically depended on the men of the family. Poverty causes you to make some very basic decisions. One can think, “I have some essential needs, and so little money. What is going to get priority?” The woman, we are told, had two coins. And that fact is the significant part of the story. Jesus noted that this was probably all she had to live on. Two coins. “What to do I do with one? What to do with the other?” She could have kept them both for herself in her basic, immediate needs. She could have split it up, one for the temple and one for herself. But she saw the need of the work of the temple and the honour of God as the more important need. So she gave both to the temple treasury. An incredibly, incredibly generous act. So remarkable that it is remembered in our Scriptures.

It is such a simple illustration of something we do all the time with different aspects of our life. Her financial life came down to two little mites that she had to allocate. Our financial life has many more bits to it. We deal with millions of pennies each year. Yet we make the same decision she made: “how generous will I be?” The same thing with the increments of our time. We have 86,400 seconds to each day. Tiny, tiny units of time, yet day by day we allocate them: some for us, some for others.

I think we all consider ourselves to be pretty generous people in what we are willing to do for the sake of others. I think we each have our habit of generosity in life that is unique to each of us. And generosity is a great habit to have. Habits are things we do by our nature, without thinking. But this story is a help to us, because the light of this great illustration of generosity can shine upon our habits, helping us to see and reflect upon our habits as they are. It can help us to ask, “can I stretch my own sense of generosity?”

In the narthex there is a box from the Lion's Club for collecting eyeglasses that are no longer any good for us. I've met the man who comes along and collects the glasses out of those boxes. I listened to his story. This one guy, and a few helpers, go about throughout the city, finding places to leave boxes, retrieving eyeglasses, getting them to prison inmates who check the prescriptions of them and bundle them for shipping. As he was telling me his story, his work was sounding more and more daunting to me. He was giving a lot of time to this project. Yet it was evident that he had a great personal conviction that his work was crucial. So the generosity he had in his time was worthwhile, and clearly rewarding to him. Now, I have dropped glasses into those boxes occasionally, and only because the glasses no longer had any value for me. But here was a guy who had a different view of the world than I did. He saw people with a need for eyeglasses, people who couldn't afford them, and saw that he could play a role in meeting that need. In the first ten years that the Lion's Club in Canada has been doing this project, centered here in Calgary, they distributed 2 million sets of eyeglasses. The man I talked to was proud of the part he played in this. He sees a need and wants to make a difference. But he is the same as all of us: like us, he has the same 86,400 seconds in his day as we do in ours. Yet when he asks himself how he is going to use them, he decides to contribute many for the sake of countless nameless people who need eyeglasses.

The widow in our story was poor, and so clearly had her own needs. But she could appreciate other needs as well. Appreciating the needs of others can help us put into perspective the nickels and seconds that we have, and help us set priorities for their use. This is the starting point of generosity. There used to be a great commercial on TV about the reality of homeless families. The commercial made the point of how invisible this need is. The visual image was of a streetscape, with people walking by a storefront. As people are walking back and forth in front of this store, we the viewer slowly become aware of a mother and daughter who are sitting in that doorway, their image blending so well into the wall colour behind them that they are barely visible. It's an excellent parable on the reality of need, and how easy it is for us to overlook it. But if you've come to help with Inn from the Cold, and actually served a meal to a mother and her children who have no where else to go that night, then that need is more than evident. Then you cannot help but want to help.

Really seeing need can prompt reflection on our own life. To see another's need that is not my need can imply an imbalance that in compassion we can want to address. There's an old expression that you occasionally hear when a person sees another's need: "there but for the grace of God go I". That phrase is a statement of fact, that our lot could be the very same as the suffering person we see. We could have cancer, or no income, or be forced to flee if our country fell into turmoil. Recognizing that can prompt us to be gracious in turn. The widow who was poor, had two small copper coins. The fact that she gave both speaks to how she saw the need of others as more important than her own need right then in that moment. So she acted generously. I remember a visit I made once to hospital. As is often the case, while I was there another visitor arrived to see the same patient. That visitor was a longtime friend of the family—she was the next door neighbour. She was kind, soft-spoken, unassuming. Later the patient told me, "She has been an angel. She has been God-send. My hospitalization has disrupted a lot of things for me and my family. She has been there for us, helping in so many more ways than we could ever ask for or ever thank her for". This neighbour, in the health and stability of her own life, saw the need of her neighbours, and acted. Generously. "There but for the grace of God go I."

To be on the receiving end of such generosity changes you. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow twenty years ago conducted a brilliant study on compassion. One of the seminal things he discovered was that the #1 motivator for people's acts of compassion was knowing what it was like to be on the receiving side of a compassionate act. When someone gives to meet our need, graciously, generously, we feel humbled, and deep gratitude. We feel a burden lift! To know what that feels like, and then to realize that we can do that for someone else...! It incites us to reciprocity. As has been done for us, we can feel compelled to do for others. I wonder if this kind of thing was behind the generosity of the poor widow? Had she, in her poverty, benefitted from another's compassion...and was that the driving force behind her generosity that day?

One day my wife arrived at the window of the Tim Horton's drive through to learn that the stranger in the car in front of her paid for her morning coffee. Surprised, grateful, she told the clerk that she would pay for the coffee of the person behind her. The Tim Horton's clerk called over his shoulder, "she's paying for the next driver!" and the workers all cheered. Then the man told Sheri, "we're running an unbroken chain of 34 cars with each driver paying for the next driver back!" Once in St. Petersburg FL a Starbuck's had a chain continue for 11 hours and 378 beverages. Again, we are talking about a handful of nickels, but wouldn't it be a great world if this kind of thing was normal? So to be on the receiving end of generosity can change you, prompting feelings of humility and gratitude that can spur us to be generous in turn. Take a moment right now and recall a moment...two moments, when you have been on the receiving end of generosity. What difference did that generous act make for you? How did it feel? Now ask yourself: Can I make that kind of difference in the life of another person? How might I feel because of my act of generosity?

I ask this last question because the act of being generous can be motivating as well. A couple of years ago on a roadtrip Sheri and I went out late in the evening for a simple meal. We got pizza. We bought one bigger than we needed so half the pizza could also be the next day's lunch on the drive. On the way back to our hotel we saw a homeless man sitting on the grass. He wasn't looking at us. He wasn't begging. It may simply have been his place for the night. Sheri saw him too. I looked at Sheri, she nodded her head and I took the pizza over to the man. He received the box with both hands, and while holding it like an offering he silently bowed his head to me. It was the right thing to do and it felt good doing it. The sociologist Robert Wuthnow in his study also found that one of the biggest motivators for acts of compassion was how we feel after we've done a good deed. We feel good! Now, some people are critical of this motivation: that we shouldn't be generous to others because it

makes us feel good. But I look at that differently. Somehow, in some mysterious way, we—God’s human creature—have been hardwired to feel good when we are generous. When we give something of ours away, whether that be of our time or effort or money. Isn’t that a wonderful nature to have (that being helpful, kind, generous can feel good) and to act on?

How generous can we be? That will be our own judgment call, depending on the need we see and our own circumstances. Not everyone can be like the poor widow, who was so memorable for what she did. But we need to remember that what made this poor widow remarkable to Jesus was not so much what she did but why she did it. A widow giving a penny would not change much in the world. Really. But the example of her generosity, though, has spoken to millions of people over 2,000 years of history. Being an example of generosity to others is perhaps the biggest help we can give to the world, for we might by our own actions inspire another. Like in the movie “Pay it Forward”, our witness in generosity can have a domino effect that we will never, ever appreciate, but one that can have a profound impact, even in something as small as a nickel. Nickels, after all, add up.

Varsity Acres Church is now in the midst of a time of renewal. In the coming months we will see its organization change and its activities change. In that renewal we are also considering a new orientation to be a greater aid to our neighbours. If this renewal is to happen we will have to think about our own sense of generosity. Part of the renewal is to strengthen pastoral care. We want to add a few people to the Pastoral Care Group. Hopefully, we also want to organize a whole new layer of care to meet needs of our own people in this church. Part of the renewal is to create a new group (committee) whose prime purpose will be to strengthen our sense of community as a church. Part of renewal we are considering is how we love our neighbour, expressing care more deliberately to people beyond our walls. In today’s society the church is virtually invisible. Consequently a growing number of people have no idea who we are and what we stand for. They will only know if they see it, and for them to see it we have to go out and show them. Show them through our kindness. Everyone here loves this congregation and wants to see its renewal. So the question is: what part can you play? Where can you contribute: in strengthening us as a congregation, to express better care to our own and express greater care to those who are not here?

Each of us, in our own unique way, can make a difference. Through financial support, prayer, contributing your time and commitment, by being an encourager of others, being a positive supporter of change. And if each of us find our own unique way to be generous for the sake of others our hoped for renewal will happen. It all adds up like nickels.