

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

November 8, 2015 Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 12:38-44

Perhaps you've heard the one about the burglar, who late one night, broke into a house that he thought was empty. He tiptoed through the living room but suddenly he froze in his tracks when he heard a loud voice say, "Jesus is watching you."

Silence returned to the house, so the burglar crept forward again. "Jesus is watching you," the voice boomed again.

The burglar stopped dead in his tracks. He was frightened. Frantically, he looked all around the room. In a dark corner, he spotted a bird cage and in the cage was a parrot. He asked the parrot, "Was that you who said Jesus is watching me?"

"Yes," said the parrot.

The burglar breathed a sigh of relief, then asked the parrot, "And what is your name?"

"Clarence," said the bird.

"That is a dumb name for a parrot," sneered the burglar. "What idiot named you Clarence?"

The parrot said, "The same idiot who named the Rottweiller Jesus."

I remember in the first weeks of being a pastor - I went to the grocery store in the community where I served. I had just unloaded the groceries from the cart into my car, and was about to leave the cart where I was, when I saw someone from church in the next aisle. We waved at each other; and then guess what I did.... I took the cart back of course.

John Wooden was a great basketball coach - UCLA for nearly 30 yrs, 10 championships; he was an amazing person: wise, kind, well-respected. He is credited with this familiar saying:

The true test of a person's character is what we do when no one is watching.

I think about that sometimes when I'm alone in the house and I start dancing around to some old 70's disco music, or sneak candies from the candy bowl.

What about when no one is watching and you are doing a good deed?

There's an old Seinfeld episode in which George Costanza frequents a take out pizza place - the kind with the tip jar at the cash register - and every time he gets a pizza he puts a dollar in the tip jar. However, the cashier always turns away just as he's placing it in the jar, and never sees him do it. This infuriates George, so he keeps returning to the place and with great flourish places the dollar in the jar to draw attention, but every time the cashier turns aside. Finally his frustration gets the best of him and he reaches back into the tip jar to retrieve the dollar he just put in (without being noticed of course), and just at that moment, the cashier turns back to see George stealing from the tip jar!

We want to be recognized for our good efforts. Right?

We might get some satisfaction when we do the right thing even when no one else is around. But when we get noticed:

We feel valued and affirmed
We feel important and on the right track

But we don't want to seem braggy and self-serving – being boastful is NOT lifted up as a Christian virtue.

The Scribes in our reading today are an example of how NOT to be – liking a little too much the respect they get, and claiming seats of honor at banquets, and saying long prayers for the sake of appearances.

Maybe in this case, character is defined by what you do when **everyone** is watching, just as much as it is when **no one** is watching.

It seems that Jesus' judgment of the scribes is based, at least in part, on their inner motivation. But how does one judge such a thing?

How do you judge someone's intentions?

How do you know a long prayer is for appearance rather than genuine piety?

While these questions are not easy to answer, what seems clear is that today we're being asked to think about value. Particularly the notion that in the Kingdom of God, what is valued and important is different from that of human "kingdoms."

From a human perspective being noticed, being recognized, receiving credit, receiving praise are important. But from a Kingdom perspective – that is **God's** kingdom – something else is more important.

Listen again to the last couple verses:

Sitting across from the offering box, he was observing how the crowd tossed money in for the collection. Many of the rich were making large contributions. One poor widow came up and put in two small coins—a measly two cents. Jesus called his disciples over and said, "The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they'll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford—she gave her all." (The Message)

Clearly, those things that are valued in the kingdom of God differ from that in wider society – both 2,000 years ago and today. But I don't think this reading is necessarily saying that everyone needs always to give everything. Rather, the widow has decided that her money, what little of it she had, belonged to God.

Which suggests that faithful giving (and faithful living) is not for the sake of recipient but rather for the sake of (or maybe it would be more accurate to say proceeds organically from) the life of the giver. Her two coins won't make an impact on the temple budget; but they make all the difference for her.

You see her two coins meant that she had to trust God, her family, her friends, her "church" to sustain her. Very un-American, I know. But remember the Christian life is about the Kingdom of GOD, not the Kingdom of American values - "I can do it by myself thank you very much" values.

And you know, if really what we desire and crave is to be recognized, noticed, praised, honored.... Well, that has already been accomplished – God more than recognizes and honors you – He loves you, so much that he became like you – that is He became human. And like you,

he suffered – both physically and emotionally. But then, he overcame the greatest obstacle – death – to show the world that He is more powerful than anything life can throw at us.

So if what we really seek is to be loved and accepted AS WE ARE – as the grocery cart abandoning, tip jar stealing people we really are – if that is the end goal, then it has been accomplished.

And if the ends are assured in the economy of God, then only the means remain.

So what if we give not because it makes a difference to the budget, but because it makes a difference to us - and not just as individuals, but as a body. Because how we give matters! How we give defines who we are.

We used to be the church that relied on our endowment funds (and not just relied upon, but misused our endowment) to simply operate. We're not that church any more! Praise God!

We used to be the church that lived in fear of not being able to balance the budget. We're not that church any more! Praise God!

We used to be the church that ignored the building crumbling around us. We're not that church any more! Praise God!

We used to be a church that didn't do anything new from year to year, because, well, why would we? I think it was my second year here, and I was at a committee meeting suggesting that we offer classes for adults – 2 / 3 week series on interesting topics – and the response was, “But no one will go to that....” Thank God we're not that church any more!

I don't want us to be the church where “good enough” is “good enough,” with the low bar of even lower expectations.

No – Christ gave his life for us – his WHOLE life as an outpouring of love. This is the best news there is. And I hope that everyone who calls this church home would be moved to gratitude and joy and a desire to share not just 2 pennies, not just a large sum, but our whole lives as well.

Next week when we come to church we will have a time when we bring forward our pledges – our financial promises to support the work of the church – and place them in a box up front here. And we do it this way, not to make a show of it, but because when we walk forward, we are bringing our whole self. It is in this way, symbolic, and symbols are important.

Coach Wooden had another saying that I have found to be true:

Be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are.

And besides, Jesus knows. He sees right past the surface into our hearts.

As you contemplate your pledge to the church this week, and discuss it in your family, actually invite Jesus into the conversation. It might sound dorky – but you know, he's already there anyway.

Amen.