

## 02/19/2023 WORSHIP SERVICE

### WELCOME

Good morning! Welcome to this time of worship. This morning we'll wrap up this three-part series on stewardship and generosity. We'll get a broad biblical overview that gives us a look at God's upside-down economy and how we can participate in it.

What are the announcements you have to share this morning about the work of the church?

**CALL TO WORSHIP** – taken from the second letter to the Corinthians.

**PRAYER** – Thank you God for your presence here with us. We open our hearts and our minds to your Holy Spirit, to move within us, to change and transform us, that we may reflect and embody your divine image of love more and more. Amen.

### SERMON -- STEWARDSHIP III – PASTOR LOIS HARDER THE WIDOW'S MITE: THE GOAL IS EQUALITY

Some of you might have seen that this last week Michael Jordan gave \$10 million dollars to the Make-a-Wish foundation. It was in honor of his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday on Friday, February 17. I read that the hope is that *his* generous donation will encourage *others* to make generous donations to this organization. Make-a-Wish helps to make wishes come true for children who are struggling with all sorts of illnesses. Jordan has apparently been a strong supporter of Make-a-Wish for over 30 years already but this is the biggest single donation he (or anyone!) has ever made to this particular organization. (CNN report on February 16, 2023) As I read further, I was reminded that Michael Jordan has been very generous over the years and has made other multi-million-dollar donations. In 2021 he donated another increment of \$10 million to open two new medical clinics in his home town of Wilmington, North Carolina. He's donated \$1 million to the NAACP legal defense fund, another million for a community program designed to facilitate felons getting back into the workforce, and \$500,000 to Black Votes Matter. You might recall that in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd his Jordan Brand company pledged to donate \$100 million over a ten-year period to social organizations that are "dedicated to ensuring racial equality, social justice and greater access to education". And his generosity extends further – he's made many other multi-million dollar donations. As a point of interest, I also read that Michael Jordan's net worth is \$1.7 billion. Now...to the Bible.

The scripture texts that Megan read for us this morning were all suggested in this lesson of the Everence curriculum that we've been using for this series on stewardship. Starting in Deuteronomy with the ancients' understanding of generosity, moving to Jesus' teaching in the gospel of Mark and then ending with Paul's commentary to the Corinthians... this progression, I

think, represents well the Biblical survey, the big-picture of stewardship and what generosity means in *God's* economy.

The first thing we need to remember is the upside-down nature of God's ways. And God's economy is upside-down too, if we compare it to the way we usually think about it.

In Deuteronomy we're reading a very prescriptive formula for tithing. The heading of this passage in the NRSV even says, "Regulations concerning Tithes". All of those details and minutia that Megan read was coming out of a time when the ancient people were trying to create some structure for themselves – something tangible, some rules that represented their understanding of God and of what God had called them to do in order to be faithful.

By the time Jesus came and the gospel writers were trying to capture the lessons that he taught, the language around tithing and generosity was quite different, although still prescriptive. In the gospel of Mark, this section of chapters 11, 12 and 13 is full of conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day. At the beginning of chapter 11 we read about Jesus' upside-down, "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem on a small donkey. On his way into the temple he cursed the poor fig tree and then he drove out the moneychangers, flipped their tables, yelled at them for turning the temple into a den of robbers and generally made a lot of enemies out of the people who were in positions of power; but not all of them. Earlier in chapter 12, verse 28-34, we read about the scribe who asked Jesus for clarification about which commandment is central, at the heart of the law? Jesus offered the well-known response, (paraphrasing now...) Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. The scribe agreed with Jesus and went even further to say, "Love is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." "You are not far from the kingdom of God." Jesus answered him.

But in the verses just before the story of the widow's mite, Jesus made another reference to widows as he took some of the scribes to task. He said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

Then the religious leaders began to publicly question Jesus' authority and to try to trap him with their questions so that they could justify having him killed.

In the midst of that kind of conflict, Jesus sat down (which is to say he took the position of a teacher, a rabbi) and began to watch as people brought their offerings to the temple treasury. What he saw might have sounded something like this... (Pour a bunch of coins noisily into a tall, glass jar. Then drop 2 coins in.)

The wealthy folks gave out of their abundance. The widow gave all she had out of her poverty.

But what kind of religious system is set up like that? Those same religious leaders who claimed to be so pious and holy were charged with caring for the widows. That was literally part of their job. Remember the earlier reference that Jesus had made to the scribes who devour widows' houses? "The widows' houses may refer to the property of those for whom they act as legal representatives. Instead of protecting the rights of their clients, they find ways of robbing them", wrote one commentator about this passage. (Timothy Gaeddert in the Believers Church Bible Commentary on Mark, page 292-3) Why was this woman so poor in the first place when the very institution to which she gave her last coins was supposed to be looking out for her, caring for her, loving her? This was surely part of what was making Jesus so agitated and angry. What part of "love your neighbor as yourself" are you not getting?, he was asking.

When Paul wrote his letters to the Corinthians, and particularly this second one, relationships were strained and we can really see his skills shining through. Paul was an expert communicator and in these letters he utilized all of his rhetorical prowess. He was also a powerhouse fundraiser; he might have even given Eric Schrag a metaphorical run for his money. But most importantly Paul was a faithful disciple of Jesus, an apostle, sent out to continue Jesus' ministry. And, if you remember, the central commandment, the heart of the law, as Jesus preached it is love. Love for God and love for neighbor.

Relationships were strained because there were disagreements and divisions within the bodies of believers. They were struggling to know how to BE this new movement. The group in Corinth was mostly Gentile – Paul himself had nurtured and taught them, and welcomed them. He had assured them that they were equals among the Jewish believers, and that the men didn't need to be circumcised in order to follow Jesus. But what they DID need to do was step up to the plate financially and give to the saints in Jerusalem who were struggling with very real poverty.

It was an ironic twist. Paul was setting up a strategic triangle between the traditional, established saints in Jerusalem, the "Mother Church", if you will, and the two younger groups, one in Macedonia and the other in Corinth. He was challenging them to remember Jesus' call to love as a response to his grace.

The Corinthians were generally some of the wealthier people in the region, because they lived in a cosmopolitan port town that bustled with trade and commerce. Paul writes that the Macedonians had experienced "a severe affliction" of deep poverty and out of that, abundant joy and extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity! And they gave VOLUNTARILY! They gave beyond their means! They were begging to be a part of the ministry to the saints.

The Corinthians had started out with a bang the year before, but they kind of lost their steam and got distracted with so many other things to do with their many resources – they just needed to stay focused on the NEED of their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem and finish the collection they had started.

A significant part of Paul's understanding of how this new movement was to function was that even across the miles they were to work very hard at supporting one another in every way

possible. This meant trying to create equality and an even distribution of gifts, resources, compassion and care. If one group had much more than they needed while another group struggled and scraped to get by, what kind of message would that send to the watching world? They would be no different than any other part of their culture. Paul was absolutely convinced that the followers of Jesus needed to live together in ways that made them different – much the same as his own Jewish tradition called for the people of God to be “set apart”. But not by the old strangling rules and regulations that they tried to follow with such Pharisaical, life-draining precision – just for the sake of it. No! They had to demonstrate the kind of compassion and care for one another that showed the world that LOVE is the response to the grace of Jesus. And THAT was the singular, non-negotiable focus of their life together.

So the Macedonians were particularly gifted at generosity, they voluntarily gave sacrificially – til it hurt! And Paul was pointing out that the Corinthians were good at everything – at faith, at speech, at knowledge and eagerness, so show us now how good you are at love, Paul challenged. You all have experienced the grace of Jesus. You know that even though he was rich, for you, he became poor. He showed all of us how to give up power, to submit, willingly, without violence, to give himself completely, to pour himself out, to trust God and BE LOVE for the world. This is God’s upside-down economy and Paul was challenging the Corinthians to participate in it.

In these texts, we can see that in God’s economy what we give is relative to what we actually have. Generosity can reflect what truly motivates us. When we give as a response to grace, with a desire to love, to create balance and equality, to try to set things right – then we begin to give witness to God’s upside-down economy and to show the watching world that love is our response to the grace of Jesus. And love is what brings us together despite our many differences. It is the singular, non-negotiable focus of our faith and our life. Lord, give us the courage to love and to give with that kind of generosity. Amen.