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WHEN YOU CARE ENOUGH TO GIVE THE VERY BEST

In 1925, playwright George Kelly wrote a play entitled Craig's Wife.

- The central character in the play is Harriet Craig, a self-centered woman obsessed with her beautiful house to the exclusion of all else.
  - Gradually, Harriet drove everyone away:
    - her friends, her faithful servants, even her husband.
  - As her aunt leaves, she pauses to remark to Harriet, "Those who live to themselves are usually left to themselves."
    - As the curtain falls at the end of the play, Harriet Craig is wandering through her immaculate home, completely alone.

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The widow in today's Gospel reading was quite different from Harriet Craig.

- She had no material possessions, yet she had everything.
- She represents for us the best of life.
  - She wanted to be part of life, so she contributed to the lives of others.
    - In fact, she contributed all she had, because she cared enough to give the very best.

You may recognize this expression, "When you care enough to give the very best" as the slogan of a well-known greeting card company.

- It suggests that a few pennies spent on greeting cards for special occasions is the very best we can do to show our affection to others.
  - JESUS, however, gives us a new understanding of this expression through the example of this poor widow and her offering.

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Two coins doesn't sound like so great an offering.

- The coins were leptons, worth a quadrans, the smallest Roman coin.
  - This was equal to about a quarter of a penny.
- We give far more than that each week.
  - So why does JESUS make such a big deal about that widow's gift?
    - JESUS is pointing out that the gift that counts is the gift that costs.

JESUS measures the widow's gift by new standards.

- First, it is important to realize that the treasury into which the widow and the others around her are placing their money was a voluntary offering beyond the weekly giving.
- It was not the usual passing of the plates as we do on Sunday mornings.
  - Rather, it was a trumpet-shaped container.
  - It was placed near where the people would pass as they entered and left the Temple.
  - It was what we might call a "poor box"—an offering to help those who had little or nothing.
    - Few people put money into this except for the very wealthy, who often gave just so that others would see.

JESUS did not put down the gifts of the wealthy,

- but it was the widow's gift that JESUS lifted up to His disciples.

JESUS says that true giving is measured, not by how much is given,

- but by how much is left.
  - It's not the size of the gift; it's the spirit in which it is given.

JESUS praises the poor widow's gift because, in her giving, she holds nothing back.

- Her gift of two small coins was her next meal.
- It was not an offering; it was a sacrifice.

How easily she could have said, "What difference could a penny or two make?"

- "Let those who can afford it give."
  - "I haven't got a penny to spare."

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There is a poem that tells the story of six people gathered around a campfire on a dark and bitter night.

- Each one holds a stick of wood, which they might have contributed to the fire and the warmth it gave to all.
  - But one by one, they chose not to give what they had to keep the fire burning.
- The lone woman would not give because there was a black man in the circle.
- The penniless tramp wouldn't give because of the presence of one who was a member of the "idle rich."
- The rich man would not give because his contribution would help one who was shiftless.
- Another withheld when he recognized one who was not of his religion.
- The black man held on to his stick as a way of getting even for all that white people had done to him and his race.
- And finally, one would not share his stick because he believed in giving only to those who gave.
  - The poem ends with these words:
    - "Six logs held fast in death's still hands was proof of human sin.*
    - They didn't die from the cold without.*
    - They died from the cold within.*

The campfire for us is the church.

- This congregation has a very generous spirit, but not so in many congregations.
- Many would just as soon hold on to their sticks of wood, even if it means that the fire goes out.
- Many would prefer to hang on to their money, time, and talents,
  - and turn away when services are requested, pretending that there is no need or that someone else will take care of it,
    - even if it means that the programs of the church end,
    - or that the leadership dwindles for lack of volunteers,
    - or that the mission of the church falters and withers on the vine?

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We tend to think of stewardship primarily with regard to giving money, but that is a significant misrepresentation of GOD's desire for us as stewards of all that we have and are.

- JESUS' elevation of the widow is about more than just the money she gave.
  - It's about the attitude with which she gave.
- The problem of those others who gave is that they were more concerned with what they had than with the needs of others.
  - They'd given into the notion that the primary measure of well-being is whether the recipients are simply "better off than they were before."

GOD didn't set up society that way, though.

- Think, for a moment about the Ten Commandments—those rules that GOD gave in order that we take care of each other.
  - For though they may at first seem burdensome when we think of what they require of us to do for our neighbors,
    - when we consider that our neighbors are using them as guides for helping, suddenly, it all makes sense.
    - Unlike what those around the campfire believed, we are not isolated individuals, but rather are a community, a group of people gathered about together by mutual need and caring.

How easy it is to cave into our insecurity and cultural messages of scarcity,

- and be seduced to “look out for number one.”
  - But JESUS offers the example of the widow to us as an invitation to remember the gift of community and fellowship we have been given in our households, communities, and congregations.
    - We are here for each other—created and blessed with many abilities and assets and drawn together to care for each other and the world.

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A statement I've always liked says this: You are not poor if you can give to another.

- But again, stewardship is not just about money.

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There was a priest who served on an island in the Pacific.

- On his first Sunday there, while on his way to the church, he encountered a beggar who knew the priest would pass that way.
  - “Give me a coin,” the beggar said.
    - The priest did so.
- The following Sunday, the beggar was again waiting for the priest.
  - And the next.
- The priest did not want to be confronted in this way every Sunday, so the following Sunday, when he saw the beggar, he spoke first.
  - “Give me an offering for the church,” he said.
    - The beggar looked confused, fumbled through his clothing, and found a coin.
- The next Sunday, the priest asked the beggar again, and the beggar had his coin ready.
  - On the following Sunday, the priest said, “Bring your coin to church and give it yourself.”
    - The beggar did so.
- Once he came to church, some people took an interest in him, found him a job, and eventually, he became a believer.
  - Ultimately, he became a leader in the church.

When it came time for the priest to leave for another call, the former beggar said, “I never knew I had anything to give until you asked me.”

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As Christians, we are called to give.

- In fact, giving is probably the most CHRIST-like thing we can do.
- Sharing our time, abilities, and wealth is the secret to abundant life.
  - Holding back brings only death in one form or another, just as those who held back died around their campfire.

- Where would we be if GOD held back in giving GOD's only Son?
- What future would we have to look toward if GOD had waited for us to give or at least ask before acting?
- GOD did act, though, and gave the very best—JESUS the CHRIST—so that we might have eternal life.
  - GOD cared enough to give the very best.

The passage that precedes today's reading calls us to love the LORD our GOD with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

- And then to love our neighbor as ourselves.
  - Our giving is how we show our love for GOD by showing our love for our neighbor.

Next month, we will approve our congregational budget for 2025.

- That budget says a lot about how we understand ourselves as a congregation.
  - As we consider our receiving and spending as a congregation, perhaps we can also pause to remember that we are called to be stewards of each other--
    - each member called to be stewards of each other--
    - each member committed to the welfare and well-being of the rest of the community.
      - Maybe we can experience again and anew GOD's blessing—the very best given to us,
        - and then consider to whom we can give the very best.