

Quietly Serving The Lord

When I got the call asking me to speak to you today, my first thought was ‘Huh? Did you call the wrong number?’ And then I thought about it and realized that I do have something to say and I am thrilled to have the opportunity to stand up in front of all of you and share my thoughts. So here we go, this is how the Bible passages spoke to me this week...

Jesus’ story of the widow and her two small coins is one of my very favorite stories from the Bible. It’s a wonderful analogy for what I believe a true Christian should strive to be. This woman was one of the least important people in her time and place. She was poor, a woman, and had no man to represent her. In her day, she was voiceless. However, she showed a tremendous wealth of spirit in her gift of two coins. These tiny coins represented almost nothing when compared to the wealth of the scribes – very important men who were held in high esteem (especially by themselves!), however, when compared to her total wealth, these two small coins were the equivalent of Warren Buffet’s fortune. In some versions of the Bible, the scribes deride her for her lowly gift – they tell her it is an insult. This is where Jesus steps in to defend her gift and her courage. At the same time, he reprimands the scribes for their lack of humility, which is much more an affront to the Lord than their perception of the widow’s ‘insulting’ gift.

I think we all have been blessed to know people who have given much to the Lord – who have served Him in soft, silent ways. I have always felt that these are the people who really ‘get’ the meaning of servitude and being a follower of the lessons of Jesus. Now, don’t get me wrong, it doesn’t take poverty for a person to fall into this category. There are very wealthy people who give of themselves without thought of how great they’ll look when they make their gifts – one couple who comes to my mind is Bill and Melinda Gates. Their foundation has quietly given to many people around the world, and lives by 15 guiding principles. Here are a few of them: **Guiding Principle #12:** We demand ethical behavior of

ourselves. (If we could all live by this principle, wouldn't life be much easier all the way around?). **Guiding Principle #14:** Meeting our mission—to increase opportunity and equity for those most in need—requires great stewardship of the money we have available. (This one sort of makes me think of the widow, who was a loving steward of her limited funds). And my favorite principle: **Guiding Principle #9:** We must be humble and mindful in our actions and words. We seek and heed the counsel of outside voices. (Humility – I think this is an important ingredient of servitude. We must remain humble as we give of ourselves).

Then there are those people who may not have a vast fortune to share, but they do serve the Lord in a quiet, unassuming way. One of those people who comes to mind has been a friend of our church for many years: Lois Harwick. She spent many years as our director of Christian Education and continues to live her mission. I am sure that many of you have been the recipient of a kind letter from Lois at one point in your life - she takes the time to remember people and gives her time to them in the form of a note that reminds you that you are remembered, and that you are important to her. I always appreciate her gesture, especially in this day of text messaging, email and voicemail. That handwritten note is a gift to which you can return multiple times. You know that someone took the time to remember you.

My great Aunt Marg was another one of those people. She was retired from Ma Bell in NYC and I remember fondly going to the old bus station in Hartford (remember it? It was kind of a hole in the wall at one end of the train station – long before upgrades were made). We would go to pick up this little elfin lady who would be dressed in a sweatshirt, sneakers and rolled down stockings (she never threw anything out – if the stockings had runs in them, they could be cut off and reused as ankle socks...),. She would come off the bus with multiple bags hanging off each of her arms. Honestly, if you didn't know better, you would think we were picking up a homeless woman who just happened to step off the Greyhound from New York City. That was part of what made her so special. She really had no sense of vanity – she was happy being who she was. Aunt Marg

would come to our house laden with all of those special treats we couldn't get in Glastonbury, Connecticut. German Stollen (yum), Lekvar cookies and once she even brought me a balalaika (which is a Russian stringed instrument)!

When Aunt Marg came to visit, she gave my parents a much needed break. She only slept about 4 hours a night, so while we were all in bed, she would tackle the mounds of ironing that had piled up in the closet. You know how you learn things as an adult that you didn't see as a child? Well, I learned as an adult that there were times in our family where money was very tight. My parents had three children with medical issues and these costs strained our family budget. Once, our refrigerator died, and the money was just not in the budget for a new one (although with some finagling, it could be arranged). In stepped Aunt Marg – she insisted that we go buy a new one on her dime. This gift gave her great joy. She always told me that when she gave a gift to someone, it came back to her multiple times. I think the biggest return she got from her quiet generosity was the joy she received from helping people. Aunt Marg preferred that these gifts remain silent – she wasn't looking for glory or recognition, she was looking to help someone in need. Boy, did she get the idea of giving and serving the Lord through your gifts.

Now, don't get me wrong, Aunt Marg was not a regular churchgoer, in fact, the family joke was that if Aunt Marg stepped inside a church for anything other than a wedding or a funeral, the foundation of that church would probably start to shake. But Aunt Marg didn't need to be in a church to be serving the Lord.

She had this good friend from the phone company, Nettie Rome (I always loved Nettie's name). Nettie, like Aunt Marg, never married. When Nettie retired from Ma Bell, she moved to upstate New York. As she became infirm, Nettie, who had no living relatives, ended up in a nursing home, far from any people she had known as a younger woman. As an adult (again, I learned well after the fact), I found out that Aunt Marg took regular trips to upstate New York to visit Nettie. Not for the glory, not for any recognition, but because Nettie was her friend and

needed to be reminded that she had someone who cared for her. These trips were not easy for Aunt Marg – she couldn't just jump in her car and drive on up for the day. You see, Aunt Marg never got her driver's license. She took all of these trips by public transportation (she was an avid bus rider). In fact, at one point, Aunt Marg bought a car so that when she had to ask people to driver her someplace, they wouldn't have to use their own car – that's the kind of thoughtful person she was. Aunt Marg was special, she wasn't religious, but she was spiritual. I only hope that I can be half as thoughtful and generous as she was. I miss her to this day, but every memory of her is a good one. She understood the importance of quiet service to a higher power.

In our church, there are so many behind the scenes opportunities to serve the Lord. The Gift of Giving Tree is a good example. I know many of you make it an annual tradition to pick one or two names off one of the trees so that you can share your bounty with those who are not as fortunate as you and that's a really wonderful gift. However, did you ever stop to think of how those trees end up in the Social Hall (or wherever they will be this year!)? There is a very special lady in our church, Joan Stevens, who spends a great deal of time gathering volunteers for the various organizations represented on those gift ornaments. She organizes the creation of the ornaments, the tree setup and the follow through for each of the gifts that each ornament represents. Joan is quietly serving the Lord.

Our youth participate on a mission trip each year to help build houses for Habitat for Humanity. There's a lot of background work that goes into making those trips happen and it's the people in the background who are the building blocks for these construction opportunities. Some of these people are Jane DeMaio, Pam Reale, Elayna Szkrybalo, Jackie Parente, Mark Ritter, Brian and Hallie Hollister. See, there are a lot of people who are making a quiet gift of time to this church mission. Without them our youth would not have the experience of giving that Habitat offers. These silent partners in mission generously serve a better purpose, not because it is a highly visible and high powered position, but because it is the right thing to do and it helps our congregation to reach out and serve God.

Another quiet mission in our church is Christian Service. These are the people who call to ask if you would be willing to bake for receptions for various events. Can you imagine what it would be like if there was a memorial service held for a member of our church and there was no coffee, tea or baked goods for the mourners after the service? It is these silent servers who provide the gift of hospitality to members and visitors to our church. They welcome people of all faiths to our church home.

The opportunities to serve the Lord are so varied in our church, our homes and our community at large. We do not need to be looking for great rewards for our service or our gifts; in fact those quiet gifts are much more powerful and rewarding to the spirit. Imagine if you will if the widow with the two small coins said, 'Hey, wait a minute, my gift is so minimal, that it isn't worth the effort', or if Aunt Marg decided that it was just too much bother to take a bus to visit Nellie in upstate New York? Consider the possibilities for service and remember these two remarkable women who gave so much of themselves to help others. Neither one of them has monuments erected to their memory; instead, they have left their memories etched into our hearts. The results of their service to the Lord is reward enough.