

**Palm Sunday**  
**March 16, 2008**

**Real Faith for Real Life: Generosity**

Mark 12: 42-44

Matthew 21: 1-11

Chris Novak was my best friend in high school. We sat next to each other during homeroom, ran track together after school, and hung out with each other on weekends. We were scoutmasters together after graduating from high school and Chris was the best man at my wedding.

I distinctly remember the only day that I ever set foot in Chris's home. It wasn't until several years after we met that he felt comfortable enough to invite me in.

Chris's mother had a compulsive disorder that caused her to hoard anything she could get her hands on. Their house was so filled with stuff piled from floor to ceiling that there were just narrow paths to navigate from one room to the next. Chris' dad was a laborer and with six children they never had much money, so Chris' mother did most of her shopping at yard sales. The things she brought home day after day had little monetary value, but she was convinced that she couldn't live without them.

Chris was so ashamed of the condition of his home that he never invited anyone in, and we never spoke about it again after the one time that he did invite me in.

Chris' mother had a mental illness, but if we are honest we must all admit that we carry within us the same disposition. Hoarding is a universal addiction. No matter how much we have, it is never enough to satisfy our longing. The more we keep for ourselves the more we want for ourselves.

We joke about it a lot, but at some deep level we carry the same shame that my best friend Chris felt. The places where we hoard our stashes are places that we really don't want anyone else to see. Our basements are piled high, our garages are so cluttered that we can't fit our cars in anymore, and we all have closet doors that we never open in the presence of company. When we run out of room to store all our stuff, we build sheds and rent storage units.

Like any addiction, hoarding always diminishes the quality of our lives. The more we have, the more obsessed we become with securing all our possessions. We build fences and walls and install elaborate security systems to keep others away from our stuff. Some of us even move out of our neighborhoods and into more secluded and restricted communities. The more we have, the more preoccupied we become with keeping everything we have for ourselves. Without even realizing it, hoarding leaves us increasingly isolated and alone.

Hording is addictive, but generosity is infectious. Generosity is like a healthy virus that gets passed from one person to another and can transform the life of an entire community. Last month, we were inspired by the testimonies of people who spoke at our congregational meeting about their commitment to tithe the first tenth of their income to the church. They spoke about their giving as an expression of their gratitude to God for the blessings of life they enjoy every day. They spoke about their deep appreciation for the caring community they experience in their relationships with all of their brothers and sisters in Christ here in this congregation. They spoke about their commitment to support the mission of this church as it seeks to embody the ministry of Jesus Christ here in the city of Battle Creek, Michigan.

And many of us were inspired by their generosity. The next week we received a gift from a family that was inspired by the testimony they heard and wanted to help inspire the rest of us to give generously. They offered to match new pledges to the church up to \$15,000. Today I am pleased to announce that \$49,000 in additional pledges have come in since our congregational meeting last month.

Hording is addictive and isolating, but generosity is infectious and draws people closer together in community.

Today in our gospel lesson, Mark told a story of people who were at very different places in their spiritual journeys. Many of the people Jesus observed coming to the temple were financially well off but were still in the infancy of their faith. They had come to worship God, but were still addicted to hording. When they gave their gifts into the temple treasury, it meant very little to them because they gave out of their abundance. They didn't believe they could live without holding on to everything they had, so they only gave their leftovers to God.

But a widow came forward who had grown into a more mature faith. She had far less to give than the others, just two copper coins, but her gift was much more significant because it was everything she had. Jesus commended her as the model of faithful living saying, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

In his book, *Real Faith for Real Life*, Michael Foss names generosity as one of the six marks of discipleship. He writes, "Giving is an essential aspect of the life of discipleship. When the followers of Jesus become miserly, we turn from the best of ourselves. We have not been created simply to watch out for our own needs. When we claim God's gifts and hoard them for ourselves, we deny the destiny God has planted within us. Things that clutter our lives and our hearts keep us from discovering the joy of giving."

Generosity is one of the fruits of the spirit that the apostle Paul identified in his letter to the Galatians. It is the outward and visible evidence of God's Holy Spirit at work in our lives. And tithing is the biblical threshold for generosity. It is the starting point that leads us to the kind of sacrificial giving that the poor widow modeled in our gospel lesson.

Tithing is an important spiritual discipline for all of us to incorporate in our daily lives because it helps us live grateful lives. When we give the first tenth of everything we have to God instead of whatever is left over after everything else, it makes giving our first priority, not an afterthought. It reminds us that everything we have is a gift from God and a blessing that we are meant to share.

Tithing is a spiritual discipline that leads to sacrificial giving. Sacrificial giving is the prelude to sacrificial living.

Today we celebrate Palm Sunday with a cross in the center of our sanctuary. The palms and the cross remind us that Jesus' entrance in the city of Jerusalem was an act of triumph through self sacrifice. Jesus rode not to a place of privilege and prosperity, but to the cross. He gave his life so that we might all have abundant life.

Palm Sunday reminds us that the journey of Holy Week always leads us to the cross.

The glad hosannas that were shouted by the crowd who first welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem have been magnified over the centuries and today echo around the world because we who follow Jesus know that triumph comes, not by amassing wealth and privilege for ourselves, but by giving ourselves sacrificially to others. Amen.