

WHAT MATTERS

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.” Mark 12:41-44

We are going through our parents’ belongings after they die. Things bring back memories—smiles, pain, annoyance, sadness, and joy. But what do we keep, and what do we throw away? What do we hold on to, and what do we send to siblings? After 60, 70, 80, 90 plus years of life, what matters?

After the children go through what is left from mom and dad, they decide to get rid of the rest by a garage sale. They end up seeing things that meant a lot to them selling for almost nothing. But they only have so much room themselves to keep what their parents had. It can be a hard way to find out what matters.

We are told today that 90% of what we have is not in cash. It is in investments, houses, cars, and our things. 100 trillion dollars is soon to be passed as non-cash gifts. But what can really be used by others? What really matters?

Do you know what happened 100 years ago today? After over four years of fighting that cost countless lives, the armistice went into effect that put an end to the First World War. For people in this country after that war November 11 was “Armistice Day.” After World War II it became Veterans Day. Back in 1918 Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, the top US flying ace during the war, was flying over the battlefield. He noticed at 11 AM when the armistice actually went into effect troops from the opposite sides of the French and German trenches ran toward each other, threw up their hats, and hugged each other. After all the bitter fighting that killed millions these soldiers realize that what matters was to be alive. The petty concerns that had led to the war no longer mattered.

The widow in our lesson this morning is someone who knows what really matters. Jesus and His disciples are in the temple watching people put

placing great amounts of money into the alms. They want people to know how good they are. And since they are rich, most people think they are really good to begin with. But Jesus sees the widow who puts in just a little bit. He knows that the amount may not be much, but it is all she has. A woman cannot get a job or own property. She is dependent on her husband. If the husband dies, she either has to depend on another male relative or barely eek out an existence. But this woman gives what she has to God. Why? Because that is what really matters!

What we see in this woman is that “what matters” is based on “why” it matters. She was willing to give her “what,” what she had, because of the “why,” because it was for God. When we think in terms of “what,” we see only so much. I only have so much money. I only have so much energy. I only have so much talent, I only have so much time. So we are careful not to share too much of what we have. Younger people can seem a lot bolder about their “whats.” They are more likely to get too little sleep, spend too much money, convince themselves that they have unlimited energy. The result is that they can do a lot of bad and wasteful things. But as we get older and supposedly wiser, we learn to not stretch ourselves so thin, to conserve what we have. Perhaps we end up then doing less bad things, but we end up failing to do the good we should do.

When we focus on the “why,” then we don’t worry about the “what.” What we give for God will never run out. We think of the story of Elijah and the widow. She had only so much oil and flour in her jar, enough for one meal for her son and herself. But she uses it to prepare bread to feed God’s prophet Elijah. When she goes back to prepare another meal, the oil and flour are there, just enough for one meal. This happens day after day.

Gary Thies was head of the Iowa Bankers Association when he decided to give that up and

spend time going to churches and telling them about missions all over the world. This has helped individuals and families to support many missionaries. One time he went to eastern Iowa hoping to get a big contribution from a wealthy businessman. While he was there he encountered a young widow and her son who asked to support a missionary. After all the visiting he did with the businessman, he only got a modest contribution. He was disappointed until he realized that God had allowed him to make that trip not to receive a big sum from the rich man, but the sincere gift from the widow and her son. It was not the “what,” but the why that counted.

Every month there are announcements in our bulletins about the LWML “mites.” The LWML stands for Lutheran Women’s Missionary League. Each month women in our churches add extra offerings that go to support mission work all over the world. Their inspiration is that nameless widow who Jesus says putting in her mites in the temple. The “why” of her love for God moves women to the “what” of giving their “mites.”

Knowing the “why” helps us to see what matters in all our lives. Imagine sending our military troops to somewhere in the Middle East and then only giving them a special steak meal once a week. They would eat great one day, but otherwise starve. Yet, we can do that to ourselves as we come to church and receive the rich food of Jesus’ true body and blood in Holy Communion, God’s Word, and the fellowship of being with his people, then go the rest of the week without any nourishment from God. Think of how we can use our technology to make that happen—listen to devotions or Bible readings while we exercise, drive in the car, or have our morning coffee. When we experience the “why” of all that God has done for us, then the “what” is in His hands. Then we know as we say in the Lord’s Prayer that He will give us our daily bread, “what” we need for each and every day.

Sermon delivered by Pastor Mark T. Heilman
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