

## “Are You Out Of Control?”

Mark 12:38-44

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost – November 7, 2010

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As we begin our Stewardship Campaign this week, I have some important questions for our consideration: How many people here [*or, in this sanctuary and listening on the radio*] today would be inclined to say that they are in control of their lives? How many people would like to think that they are in control? How many people think they have *some* measure of control over their lives? How many people think they have *no* control over their lives?

It is people who answer honestly that they have *no control over their lives* who are closest to the kingdom of God. The answer to the question, “Am I out of control?” should be, “Yes, I am out of control!” I should be “out of control,” if I call myself a Christian! As I understand it, the whole point of being a Christian is turning my life over completely to Jesus Christ. It’s about losing control over my life; it’s about letting the Lord take control.

Jesus saw the Scribes and Pharisees of his day as being very much in control of their lives. It is *not* something Jesus commended. The scribes were aloof and condescending; they had polite, academic discussions about truth, righteousness, and the finer points of scripture. They were the ones that the world noticed. They had large amounts of money to give because they had been well compensated. They were on top. Jesus, who rejected their authority, called them fools and hypocrites.

Remember how Jesus one day pointed to a child in their midst and said, “Unless you become like this little child ...unless you abandon your control over your life ...unless you trust like this little one trusts ...unless you are dependent on God like children are dependent on adults for their welfare ...unless you give up trying to run your life your way, thinking that you have all the answers ...unless you repent and believe in me with childlike simplicity, you are keeping yourself out of the kingdom of God.”

On another day, as we read in Mark chapter 12, Jesus pointed, not to a child, but to a poor widow as an example of someone who had learned to trust God with a childlike trust and innocence. The setting is the treasury in the outer court of the Temple. Over to the side, out of immediate view, is the poor widow and her one penny offering. Hoping no one would notice,

she surreptitiously drops her last two coins, worth one penny, into the treasury box. People would not have noticed her, had it not been for Jesus. He commended her for being out of control ...for abandoning her last penny ...for sacrificing everything she had for God's work ...for demonstrating that she depended on God for the provision of her daily needs. Her love for God is excessive, extravagant, profligate, prodigal. Jesus says her penny represents more love and more understanding of God than all of the thousands of dollars given by the rich. In her giving, she is a prelude to the self-giving of Jesus. It is noteworthy that this incident occurred while Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem with the cross and certain death looming ahead of him. A couple of chapters later in Mark's gospel Jesus would be out of control in the sense of laying down his life extravagantly. Jesus would lay down every part of his life, every penny he had for us, on the cross.

The point is this: Giving us all that he has, Jesus expects all *from us*. Losing control over his own life by going innocently and sacrificially to the cross on our behalf, Jesus is looking for us to lose control in similar vein. I think you will agree that often, unhappily, it is terrible misfortune or tragedy in our lives that finally teaches us that we are *not* in control, that our life is really *not* our own and we are *not*, in fact, calling the shots. I wonder what would happen if we began to think this way when very good things happen to us. What if great outcomes and successes also stop us in our tracks and make us think about who is really in charge and how much control we have? There's an Italian saying: "If you eat with two hands, you'll choke."

This proverb is, thankfully, not true of everyone. There are those who have given generously with two hands out of their abundance, their success, their plentiful resources, their great riches. Now and then we hear news that some well-known billionaire has been moved to give away a portion of his or her considerable wealth. Such generosity is met with the admiration and thanks of the world.

But there is another kind of philanthropist represented by many whose names, like the poor widow in this gospel story, will never be known: the faithful people who keep the churches and shelters and community centers and clinics and mission stations and campgrounds going ...who send deserving high school graduates to college and help provide food and medicine for children halfway across the world. These are the people who bring us closer to the word of God through the witness of their discipline of giving. They show us a way to be free

from the bondage and idolatry of money. They show us a path, a way into a life lived with the word of God. They illustrate what it means to be “out of control.”

The nameless woman, whose ultimate fate we never know, is possibly the best icon of human trust, for her story was a precarious one. She went to the Temple that day not knowing if she would ever have two little coins to call her own again. It could have been her path to a life of begging, or even a station on the road to starvation. But in facing an uncertain future, giving up control, the widow reached out to God. She trusted that if she gave everything she had to God, even the little she gave would be honored.

As I said, we don't know how the story ends ...this story of the poor widow ...this woman who was “out of control.” We trust that it turned out all right after slipping her two last coins into the treasury. We trust that whether she lived or died, she was God's because she allowed God to be in total control of her life. And by her example, Jesus shows that what we withhold may matter more than what we offer. The widow was a woman of great faith, who held nothing back. She already knew what we are just beginning to learn: that we are to give, knowing that everything we have is God's already. We can't provide God with anything. But we can offer our very selves to the kingdom of God, holding nothing back, letting go, losing control.

If I was asked what quality, more than any other, I would look for in the selection of staff and colleagues to work with me in ministry, I would have to say *passion*. I look for people who have a *passion* for ministry, a desire to serve God, and a love for the church. I believe the current staff of MUMC, both program and support staff, is one of the best teams I have worked with during my 37 years in ministry. Why do I say that? It is the *passion* that our current members of staff display. I love the way each one of us on staff is a little bit *out of control!*

Our staff give their all. We all have witnessed Lynda's passion for ministry with the growing number of children and families at Memorial Church. Some of you have faced a personal need or surgery in recent years and have known firsthand Peggy's, or Rodney's, or – hopefully – my compassion and care. And there are those who fill this sanctuary with majestic organ music and anthems. They are Bill Cates and Brian Vannoy: two people with a passion for music ministry and worship second to none!

I could go on and on: there are those who bring passion to administration, financial responsibility, food service, building and grounds management and security, worship leading, and Bible study. I am afraid to mention our incredibly passionate laity by name for fear of leaving someone out, but I will mention just a few ministry groups that in recent times have displayed amazing passion in their planning and programming:

- the Altar and Arts Committee under the leadership of Jane Leonard who will be sharing with us next Sunday the fruits of their fund-raising and labors as new paraments – that will further enrich our worship, and enhance the beauty of our sanctuary – are unveiled and dedicated;
- those committees that expended enormous energy, time, and commitment to make the Trash ‘n Treasure Sale, the Pumpkin Patch, and Gifts Galore successful fundraisers for our operating budget, for the music budget, and for missions;
- the passion and dedication of David and Rob Williams and all who are participating in our current Stewardship Campaign to raise the budget we need to do the things God is calling us to do during 2011;
- the sustained passion and dedication of Tony McCullough, Jane Williams, and many others who commit themselves monthly to the Angel Food Ministries program;
- the careful and fervent responsibility of people like Lynda Stone, Milton Riley, and Peggy May as they manage operational funds and Trustee investments;
- the tireless, creative, energetic work of all our nursery and children’s ministries workers and lay volunteers; and
- the sacrificial, self-giving devotion of people like Ricky Link, Mark Marion, Philip Hepler and Rodney Denton as they provide audio-visual expertise for services and programs.

Bishop Will Willimon, who was with us for the Finch Preaching Mission two weeks ago, tells the following story: “I know a woman who grew up in an atheistic home. She had no church background at all. She lived most of her life quite happily with no Jesus, no Christian faith. Then, at age forty-one, in her words, she ‘found Jesus.’ She began attending church every time the doors opened. But she did not limit her piety to the church. She began a

ministry among the poorest of the city's poor. She began inviting homeless families into her home. Her life was consumed with thoughts of how she might show her love for Jesus."

"To us," Bishop Willimon says, "it seemed a bit, well, extravagant. She seemed to some people to be out of control." Then he continues: "Perhaps she had come under the control of another who had released in her energy, vitality, and passion beyond the bounds of our measured faith. She put us in the mind of another extravagant, passionate woman long ago. Jesus tends to do that to some people. Has he ever had that effect on you?"

I say, "Hopefully, Jesus will have that effect on all of us, if he hasn't already. Hopefully, we have, or will soon come under Jesus' control and give ourselves extravagantly and passionately through our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness. Hopefully ...!"

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

\*[ ..... ] Supplementary material only if time permits. Otherwise, omit.