

## Heart in Hand

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Mark 12:28-44

Ulysses S. Grant, the great Northern Civil War General and 18th President of the United States in his memoir tells the story of when he was eight years old he witnessed his father trying to do a horse deal with a man across town, a Mr. Ralston. Mr. Ralston had wanted \$25 for his horse but Ulysses father would only offer him \$20. So the man went away. But young Ulysses really wanted that horse. So he went to his father and said, “Dad, it’s a really nice horse – why can’t we pay the \$25?” “Because it’s only worth \$20,” said his father. But Ulysses really wanted the horse and begged his father to buy it. Finally his repeated badgering wore his father down, so he went and got \$25. “Now this is what I want you to do,” his father said, “I want you to go over there and offer Mr. Ralston \$20. And if he doesn’t take the \$20 then offer him \$22.50. And if he doesn’t take the \$22.50 then offer him \$25.” The boy nodded his head. And with his dad’s \$25 he went skipping across town. He found Mr. Ralston with the horse and said, “My dad said I should offer you \$20 for the horse. And if you don’t take the \$20, then offer you \$22.50. And if you don’t take the \$22.50 then offer you \$25.” Grant says in his memoir, “It would not require a Connecticut man to guess the price finally agreed upon.”

Sometimes you have to learn the hard way, the art of negotiation. Lesson #1 never lead with your best offer. Don’t let your heart get in the way.

Life is full of negotiation, isn’t it? Just about every day we have to sort out what’s important to us and what isn’t important to us. How much is this worth to me and how much is that worth to me? We negotiate in

commerce, we negotiate in relationships, we negotiate in walking down the aisle at Publix, we negotiate even in our discipleship.

Remember when Peter asked Jesus about how many times he had to forgive his brother or sister – and he threw out what he thought would be a pretty good offer – 7 times. And Jesus counters with 70x7. They were, shall we say, far apart in negotiations.

So it’s an interesting scene when Jesus is sitting across from the temple treasury. They didn’t pass the plate back then. Along the wall of the Court of the Women in the temple were lined thirteen trumpet shaped receptacles where people were symbolically trumpeted to come forward and offer their gifts to God. And Jesus from a distance watches. And folks are coming and putting in their offerings. And for most it’s just that an offering. They’ve done well for themselves and they have lots of things to do with their money. And there has been this negotiation perhaps inside themselves and with God. How much is enough? How much do I let go of and how much do I hold back. What offer do I lead with? How much will the good Lord think sufficient? I want to make sure I’ve got enough for everything else. I want to cover my bets. But I don’t want to appear cheap in front of my friends. This internal negotiation. And the result is bags of different sizes filled with coins that represent different portions of their hearts. And these coins rattle rather conspicuously in the copper kettles. A sound offer to the Lord they hope. 20 maybe, but not the 25.

And then comes a poor widow with only two coins to rub together. Two small copper coins that add up to a penny. This apparently is what makes up her estate. And Jesus notices something. He hasn’t just noticed her poverty. He hasn’t just noticed that these two coins were her last coins. He’s noticed that’s she’s put both of them in. She could just as well put one of them in and who wouldn’t say that she had done enough. My lord, a 50% tithe – why that’s a preacher’s

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dream! It’s a dream I’d even have for myself. But left with her last two coins – she has gotten to the point of no longer needing to negotiate. She’s all in. This time – and maybe for the first time, we don’t know – this time she’s got her whole heart in her hands and that’s her offer. And with a sound barely to be heard, she drops them both in. All the chips have gone to the center of the table. She has broken the rule – never lead with your best offer. Never let your heart get in the way.

It wasn’t long before that when Jesus got asked about the greatest ONE commandment. And Jesus says it’s more than that – it’s two. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength ... AND ... love your neighbor as yourself. Not one, but two.

And the widow says, Not one, but two.

Now you and I can only guess that a gift of such proportional magnitude that overshadows all the big bags that have preceded it – probably got its start long before. I think that’s the way these things go. I don’t think you wake up one morning and say that you’re going to cash it all in. When Jesus tells the rich young ruler to sell everything he has and give the money to the poor – the thought of it puts the man in shock and he goes away sad. I think I can relate. But maybe that was the beginning of the story for him. Every story has a beginning. So maybe long ago this woman, this poor widow, got put on the path of generosity and at first it was a little. At first it was this

painstaking negotiation of what she would hold onto and what she would let go. And maybe little by little the palms opened bit by bit. And with every bit came this sense of meaning and purpose and joy. Maybe that’s what happened to the rich man – we don’t know -- maybe he didn’t sell everything at first crack, but maybe the negotiation started and he took the first step and in the first step he felt the first twinge of meaning and purpose and joy.

Because, of course, that is the whole point. The whole point is where you put your heart and is it really giving you the joy?

Gordon Cosby, who started and then pastored for decades the Church of the Savior up in Washington, DC --- a church that in order for you to become a member you must agree to serve the poor in the city and also provide proof that you are tithing --- Cosby tells the story of how that story began. He was a young pastor in Lynchburg, Virginia and the head of the deacon board came to him and told him that there was a widow in the congregation who had six children and they estimated she could not be making more than \$40 a month as a cleaning lady and who nevertheless was giving out of that \$40 a \$4 tithe to the church. The well intentioned deacon said she could not afford to do this. And would Pastor Cosby please go and tell her that she was relieved of her obligation. Cosby writes, “I am not wise now, I was less wise then. I went and told her of the concern of the deacons. I told her as graciously and as

supportively as I knew how that she was relieved of the responsibility of giving. As I talked with her tears welled in her eyes. “I want to tell you pastor, you are taking away the last thing that gives me life dignity and meaning.”

Dignity and meaning. The poor widow stands inside the massive temple – the Great Herodian temple – one of the wonders of the world. What were her two little coins? They didn’t need to have them. But she needed them to have them.

Most of us remember, I’m sure, the gift received about 20 years ago by the University of Southern Mississippi. It was a gift of \$150,000. A nice generous gift and yet relative to gifts received recently from Stanford and Harvard and the like – modest. But it came from someone they didn’t know. No record of this lady. Her name was Oseola McCarty. She lived two blocks away from the school in a tiny little house and for sixty years served the town as a wash lady. Never went to college, let alone high school. She just did people’s wash. On a scrub board. No one did the wash better than Oseola. Two blocks away from this college who back when she could have gone to college she wouldn’t have been accepted because of the color of her skin. But sixty years back the story started. And content with what little she had – her tiny little house – she tithed her income to the church, fed herself and put the rest of the money in the bank. Amazing what sixty years of saving can do. And when the time came there was nothing to negotiate. She took all the chips and put them in the center of the table and said I want to make sure some children get the chance to do what I didn’t get the chance to do. She broke the rule. Her best offer came first. She led with her heart. Not 20. Not 22.50. But 25.

What a wonderful place to be, right? What great joy. And that’s what it’s about. And that’s what today is about. Another few steps forward in the journey to the joy. Started somewhere. Generosity always starts

somewhere. For some of us it started a long time ago when your folks told you what to put in the offering plate. For others it started not so long ago when you sensed this meaning and purpose and joy when you opened just a little bit your hands to reveal your heart. And maybe for some of us it’s starting today. Hallelujah. And with every start there comes this negotiation. Maybe you felt it when you were trying to decide to put on the card. This dickering inside. This wondering about what might be a fair offer. And it’s a start. And how good it is to start. And the good news is that the One who calls us keeps calling us – to the greater and greater joy and the lesser and lesser negotiation.

And that’s what this Open Palms thing has been about – getting us started on the next stage of our campus. A new chapter in our ministry when we walk down these aisles and put on this table or in these baskets our commitments to this year’s ministry and to the future development of our campus. Quiet envelopes and cards gently laid. One. Two. No rattle of coins. This quiet and fragrant offering to the Lord. Hallelujah. To God be the glory.

So before we take our next steps and start this next chapter – why not give ourselves some time to ponder and pray. To hear the whisper of the Spirit. Many of you have come prepared with cards filled out – decisions made. Take the time to ask God’s blessing upon what you will offer. Others of you, like I said earlier, made advanced commitments to the campaign but we want you to join us in our commitment time. We’d hate for people to think you didn’t participate. Use the cards in your bulletin as the sign of your commitment and bring them forward. Pray God’s blessing upon your gift. Others may have not remembered your cards, or have a new thought about your commitment – the cards in your bulletin are for your use. Pens are in the pews. Others are here for the first time or are seasonal visitors – and maybe you would like to participate in our ministry that is

supporting you today and has supported you through the years. We invite you to come forward as well. Maybe your financial support is in other places – but you want to simply write a note and say that you are praying for Church of the Palms and you want to be a part of this great procession. All of us can be a part of the parade and no one need think that they don’t have a role. The widow and the wealthy are all invited.



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Church of the Palms

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