

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
September 13, 2020
Sermon by Pastor Bart Brauer
Why would I give?

—John 19:38-42

We are starting a three-week series on Christian giving. The series is called *The Whys and Hows of Giving*. It emphasizes the giving of offerings, the giving of money and possessions to the Lord. In three weeks we have three questions to answer. The first two are singular and personal. Why would I give? How do I give? The final question is plural and collective. What are we giving toward?

Before we can talk about what want to do together, before I can talk about how I am supposed to give, I must begin with the most basic question of all when it comes to Christian giving. Without a solid answer to this question, the answer to the other questions becomes blah and bland. With a solid answer to this question, answering question two becomes cake, and answering question three becomes buttercream frosting on top of the cake. So let's get to it. The most basic question of all when it comes to Christian giving: Why would I give?

The final week of our Lord's life gives fascinating details specifying gifts, money, and amounts. Without a doubt these details are written down to teach us and provide us examples to follow, if not in quantity, then certainly in quality.

It all started with Mary. Not Mary the mother of Jesus nor Mary Magdalene, two other faithful followers of Jesus, but Mary the sister of Martha. Mary and Martha's brother was Lazarus, whom the Lord Jesus had recently raised from the dead. The weekend before our Lord Jesus died on the cross, this Mary and her sister Martha and their brother, the resurrected Lazarus, had a dinner for Jesus at their home in Bethany near Jerusalem. At the dinner Mary brought out a pound of pure nard, a very expensive perfume. She poured the perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. The whole house smelled wonderful with the fragrance of the perfume. It was beautiful.

Judas Iscariot's reaction to it was ugly. "For what reason was this perfume not sold and given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages, 300 denarii." That was just rich coming from Judas, considering, first of all, that he didn't care about the poor—he was a thief and wanted to steal the money for himself out of the group money bag which he was in charge of—and, secondly, considering that Judas was about to contract with the Jewish leaders to betray Jesus not for a year's wages, but at most for three or four months' wages. I guess Judas was consistent; he didn't think Jesus was worth the \$28,000 which Mary poured on Jesus; so he sold out Jesus for about \$10,000 or \$11,000, although, truth be told, Judas really sold his soul, and never got it back.

None of that diminished the beautiful gift which Mary brought to Jesus. You heard it right. In today's terms her gift was easily worth \$28-\$30,000 or more. That would be about a year's wages for someone working minimum wage in the state of Arizona right now. If you make more than that, then her gift would have been what you make.

The next great act of giving happened on the Tuesday of our Lord's last week, three days before he died on the cross. The Lord was at the temple with his disciples, watching the people drop their offerings into the receptacles shaped like trumpets. A lot of rich people were putting in large offerings. But what really caught Jesus' eye was a poor widow who walked up and put in two lepta. In other words, she dropped into the plate just over \$1.25. Noticing that, Jesus wanted to teach his disciples something about giving, so he called them over and told them, "This poor widow put more money in than anyone else. They all gave from their wealth, but she out of her poverty gave all she had to live on." It was a huge gift for that woman to give. And the Lord commended her giving.

A third great act of giving took place on Friday, in the time shortly after our Lord Jesus died on the cross. Who knows what the Roman administrative plan was for the dead body of the crucified, but it doesn't really matter, because another man was making his own plan. That man was Joseph, from the Judean town of Arimathea. He was a councilman on the council that had decided to condemn and kill Jesus, but he had disagreed with their decision. The Bible calls him a good and just man. He took the initiative to give Jesus a proper and respectful burial, boldly asking Pontius Pilate to give him possession of the dead body. Pilate granted Joseph's request, and when Joseph got to the crucifixion site, Jesus' corpse was still hanging on the wood. So Joseph took the body down, wrapped it in linen cloths, and hauled it to a nearby garden, a peaceful place where there was a brand new, never-before-used tomb cut into the rock. It was the grave Joseph had purchased and cut for himself; but instead, Joseph gave it to Jesus. I don't know what Joseph had paid for that garden spot, or how much money he had invested in preparing the site, but it's not unheard of to pay \$5,000 to \$10,000 for an average cemetery burial nowadays. And Joseph's burial of Jesus was not average. After all, as the prophet Isaiah foretold, Jesus was assigned a grave with the rich in his death. Joseph's gift was a generous gift.

But before our Lord is buried, there's one more giver to mention and one more gift to consider. *Also, Nicodemus came, the man who had come to Jesus earlier at night, carrying a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred litrai (about 75 pounds as we measure them today).* Wow! The amount of that gift is so staggering that some have

wondered whether that amount can even be accurate. Seventy-five pounds of aromatic spices would seem to be an over-the-top super-exorbitant amount of what would reasonably be needed at a burial. The amount Nicodemus brought on late Friday afternoon would be about 100 times what Mary had brought the weekend before: what a day laborer would earn in 100 years of work! Whatever the exact figure, Nicodemus' gift of aloes and myrrh—which, coincidentally, was the same gift which the Magi brought Jesus when he was a child in Bethlehem—was a very generous gift.

So we've considered what all these people gave in our Lord's last week. But the deeper, more meaningful question is: Why did they give? Why would they give the gifts of money and offerings which they gave? Well, I guess you would have to ask them. But based on what the Bible says about them, we know what their answers would be.

Mary, why did you pour that expensive perfume on Jesus' feet? Why would you give? "Jesus gave me my brother back. Jesus raised my brother from the dead. Jesus gave me the hope of everlasting life. He talked about his own death, and when I poured that perfume on his feet, I was preparing him for the day of his burial."

Poor widow, why did you give away all you had to live on by dropping it into the temple treasury? Why would you give? "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his mercy endures forever. Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding."

Joseph, why did you donate your own tomb and bury Jesus in it? Why would you give? "I am a disciple of Jesus. I follow Jesus. I kept it a secret up to that point because I feared what my fellow Jews might do, but it was time for me to be bold and show where my loyalty lies. I am waiting for the kingdom of God, and Jesus is at the center of that kingdom."

Nicodemus, why did you help bury Jesus, bringing along your costly gift of aloes and myrrh? Why would you give?

I don't think Nicodemus was giving for a tax deduction. I doubt the Romans were giving tax deductions that fiscal year to prominent Jews who donated to the burial of executed Jewish rabbis.

I don't think Nicodemus was giving for name recognition. I doubt he was looking to have his own name scrawled on the sacks of spices or scribbled on the tomb's stone as a public reminder of his charitable gift.

I don't think Nicodemus was motivated by a matching gift. I doubt Nicodemus was sitting around, wondering what to do with his resources, when Joseph came out of the blue and said, "Hey, there's this guy who really should be buried. I'll provide a grave if you pay for spices."

I don't think Nicodemus was giving toward a rewards program. I doubt he was chasing a deal where if you spent enough on burials for other people, then you'd get a free burial when your time came.

Nicodemus is an interesting man. He was a Pharisee. He shows up three times in the gospel of John. First in chapter 3, where he has a lengthy private conversation with Jesus at night. Then in chapter 7, where he tells his fellow Pharisees they really should give Jesus a fair hearing before they just condemn him. Then again in chapter 19, where he joins another councilmember, Joseph, a disciple of Jesus, at the burial. When Nicodemus is mentioned in chapter 7 and again in chapter 19, both times it describes Nicodemus as "the one who had come to Jesus earlier," referring to his nighttime discussion with Jesus. The time and attention which Jesus gave Nicodemus that night had a profound effect on him. The words which Jesus spoke to him changed his life.

Nicodemus, why did you help bury Jesus, bringing along your costly gift of aloes and myrrh? Why would you give?

"Jesus told me the truth. He told me that for me to see and enter the kingdom of God, I must be born again of water and Spirit. Flesh only gives birth to more sinful flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to a new spirit. Jesus came from heaven. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so Jesus was lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

"Why would I give? God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned. It was a small gift I gave that day to the God who gave me his Son, and through his Son, gave me eternal life."

So what about you? What about me? We ask ourselves the question, "Why would I give?" If Jesus has given us the hope of eternal life and the hope of the resurrection from the dead, if Jesus has promised to provide all we need in life, if Jesus has brought us into his kingdom and made us his disciples, if Jesus has told us the truth of God's love and the certainty that we will not perish but have eternal life—and he has done all these things for us—if he gave his life on the cross and came back from the dead so we will not perish in our sins—and he did, so we won't—then doesn't the question "Why would I give?" become kind of irrelevant? The only question that remains is this: "Why wouldn't I give?" Amen.