Sunday, November 1, 1987
OUR HIGHEST NEED (St. Lucas United Church of Christ, Sappington, Missouri)
Mark 12:41-44

The scripture lesson read this morning from the Gospel of Mark contains this amazing sentence: “And Jesus watched the people as they put their money into the offering plates.” That’s a slight paraphrase — but the point is clear: “Jesus is watching.”

Every time I hear this story and think of Jesus watching, I remember a story that a minister friend of mine told me last spring. He is the Senior Minister of Plymouth Church in Miami, Florida, where the crime rate is rather high. Many people are taking all kinds of measures to make their property more secure. One elderly woman who lived alone in a large house filled with expensive objects had her house secured with iron bars on all the windows. Then she added an elaborate electronic security system. However, she still didn’t feel safe. A friend suggested that she get a large watchdog, the meaner the better.

So she went to a place where such dogs could be purchased. However, the man in charge said that he only had a dog and a parrot and that they worked together as a team. One could not be purchased without the other. The woman replied that she did not want both and insisted on having only the dog. The shopkeeper was even more insistent and said they could only be purchased together. Finally, the woman agreed and took them both home. Now she felt secure.

A few weeks later, a burglar slipped into her home. He got past the barred windows and disarmed the security system. He began to gather the valuables in the house and was putting them into a large canvas bag. Suddenly he heard a voice say, “Jesus is watching.” Startled, he turned to see where the voice came from. Then he noticed the parrot. Feeling safe, he went back to his task of gathering all the valuable objects he could find. Again the voice spoke, “Jesus is watching.” He turned and looked at the parrot once more and said, “Shut up, you dumb parrot.” And then the parrot said, “Sic ‘em, Jesus!”

So as you prepare to make your pledge to St. Lucas Church, remember: Jesus is watching. It may surprise you to know that in the New Testament, Jesus spoke about money more frequently than any other subject except the Kingdom of God. He gave an unusual amount of time to the money question.

Martin Luther said, “There are three conversions necessary for the Christian: The conversion of the heart, mind, and purse.” Of these three, it may well be that we moderns find the conversion of the purse the most difficult. It is even hard for us to talk openly and frankly about money, especially in the church.

Dr. Halford Luccock, who taught preaching at Yale for years, believed he knew why it is so difficult for many people to deal with money and the church. He said that back in the early history of the church, especially among the Franks, whole armies were sometimes given baptism at one stroke, and many warriors went into the water with their right hands held high so that they did not get wet. Then they could say, “This hand has never been baptized,” and they could swing their battle axes and swords as freely as ever. The modern counterpart of this partial baptism, said Dr. Luccock, is seen in many who have been baptized in the church today — all except their pocketbooks. These are held high out of the water.

It is difficult for many of us to talk about money and the church, especially when we get personal and talk about our giving.

As Jesus watched people give and noticed how generous some were and how stingy others were, he has at least these things to teach us about money and giving.

First, Jesus reminds us that our highest need is to be a giving person. To give is to live; to not give is to die. Giving connects us with one another. Giving acts out our connection with God and God's connection with us.
It is the heart of the Christian message that God is, above all, a giving God. God's love, God's goodness, and God's creation are all freely given to each one of us and to the world at large. Since it is a basic part of God's nature to be giving, we begin to experience the transforming power of God's love in our own lives as we become giving, generous people.

Jesus said in so many ways that those among us who emphasize only taking and owning and keeping will lose our lives and our souls. However, those among us who become giving human beings will find our lives and save our lives. We are closest to God when we are givers and not takers.

Listen again to some of the words of Jesus on this subject: "You cannot serve God and mammon." "Do not lay up for yourself treasures on earth." "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God." "Take heed and beware of all covetousness."

I believe one of the major spiritual problems of our time, if not the main one, is greed and covetousness. Compulsive extravagance is a modern mania. The contemporary lust for more, more, more for ourselves is almost out of control.

I have to bite my tongue so many times when people tell me they cannot afford to give more, and then I see what they are spending their money on. I wish they would at least be honest with themselves and with me and say, "I don't believe in being a more giving person. I want more for myself."

The fact is, the more one becomes a giving, generous person, the more one enhances his or her relationship to God and to others. That's why Jesus emphasized it so much. Someone put it this way: "If your spiritual vitality seems low, if Bible Study produces only dusty words, if prayer seems hollow and empty, then perhaps a prescription of lavish and joyful giving is just what you need. Giving brings authenticity and vitality to our devotional experience."

Money is an effective way of showing our love for God because it is so much a part of us. One economist put it this way: "Money as a form of power is so intimately related to the possessor that one cannot consistently give money without giving self."

Dr. Karl Menninger once asked one wealthy patient: "What on earth are you going to do with all that money?" The patient replied, "Just worry about it, I suppose." Dr. Menninger went on to ask, "Well, do you get that much pleasure out of worrying about it?" "No," responded the patient, "but I get such terror when I think of giving some of it away."

The terror is real. I see it everywhere — people afraid to be more giving. They are not afraid to spend more money, but afraid to give it away. When we let go of money, we are letting go of a part of ourselves and part of our security. And this is precisely why it is so important to do.

When we give money, we are releasing a little more of our egocentric selves and a little more of our false security. Giving frees us to care. It produces an air of expectancy as we anticipate what God will lead us to give. It makes life with God an adventure of discovery.

Secondly, if according to Jesus, our highest need is to be giving persons, how can we tell if we are giving enough? Or how do we determine how much to give?
We are not truly a giving person until we give so that we feel it. The poor widow that Jesus watched as she put her offering in gave all that she had — so she felt it. On the other hand, the other people that Jesus watched as they put their offerings in, although they gave more than the poor widow, still gave proportionately much less — in fact, so little that they didn't miss it, so they didn't feel it.

I've heard some people say, "Give until it hurts." I think what they really mean is, "Give until you feel it." Otherwise, it is not truly giving — it's giving leftovers. Jesus was saying, "Give enough so that it makes a difference in your life. Give, not until it hurts, but give until it feels good. If you give enough, then you are going to feel it, and feel good about it."

This is what the Bible means when it says, "God loves a cheerful giver." You are going to be a cheerful giver when you are giving enough. If you are crabby about your giving, it means that you are not giving enough. Giving until it makes us feel good has a way of rooting out the tough old miser that is a part of all of us.

Thirdly, if you are going to give enough to become a cheerful giver and meet your highest need of being a truly giving person, then you have to be honest about your giving — honest with yourself, honest with others, and honest with God.
The three lies I hear most frequently concerning giving are these: (1) If I had more, I would give more. (2) I'll give later, after I take care of some other matters. (3) I'm giving all that I can afford.

The truth is that for most of us, giving $5.00 per week, or $10.00 per week to the church, or even $20.00 per week, doesn't affect us very much. We don't really feel it. Five dollars a week, or even ten or twenty dollars a week, doesn't make most of us put off buying a new car or even a less expensive model. It doesn't keep us from going out to eat or from purchasing the many little luxuries that we all purchase. If we're honest, most of us give from leftovers. We give from what's left over after we've spent money on everything else we think we need or deserve.

Here's a suggestion that will turn your life around. Decide what you are going to give first. Then each week, or each paycheck, put that amount aside and give it to the church, and then do all the rest of your buying from what's left. I can guarantee that it will change your life for the better.

If we're going to be honest about our giving, then we have to get in touch with our feelings about money. For most of us, the biggest obstacle to overcome is not understanding what the Bible teaches us about our money and our giving, but coming to terms with our fears, our insecurity, and our guilt about money. We are afraid that we have too little, or some are afraid that they have too much.

Jesus knew, above all, that to be a joyful, generous, giving person is the way to change your whole life for the better. That's why Jesus saw giving as being our highest need. Amen.