

Mark 12 38 - 44

Today I could have preached about stewardship...but instead I'm gonna preach about this stick!

Giving and receiving are ingrained into the very way of our existence...you can't just breath in for instance. You would pass out. You can't just receive without giving. When I was in Israel, they say the Dead Sea is dead because all it does is receive. It gives nothing back!

The lepton (what we call the Widows Mite) was the smallest denomination in the ancient world during the time of Pontius Pilate in Israel.

Now many of you may be seeing this reading as a guilt trip for His disciples. But like everything else Jesus teaches about there's always so much more than meets the eye!

Remember he's teaching his disciples and preparing them for the work ahead when He is soon to be gone. Just like those before us have tried their best to prepare us for when they're gone.

Jesus is addressing this women's heart turned outwardly... outwardly towards God in a real and physical way. Note that Jesus makes no judgment on whether her actions are good or bad...in fact the Temple was corrupt...so in many ways they just fleeced this widow out of her last penny.

And the Temple certainly didn't need her two cents...nor did God really. But with Jesus it's never about the thing...It's never about the stuff...it's about the thing behind the thing...something deeper... and today I will use this stick to represent a thing or the stuff!

With God ...it's not about the stick...but what folks do with their possessions, their stuff, is a pretty strong indicator of where a person's heart is...

And Jesus only ever cares about the heart...levav in Hebrew (our deepest desires) Jesus here cares about the heart of the scribes...the heart of the widow... the hearts of his disciples... and our hearts.

In today's gospel you see this poor women giving of her possessions (her stick) from a different mindset... a different way of thinking...what were her innermost desires? What was her levav...her heart!?

She gave from a different reality...a reality I like to call the Kingdom of God.

So maybe I can say it like this...Everything...It's all just STICKS! You got People and You got Sticks!

What do you do with sticks? Well you can collect them...hoard them for the coming winter...use them as needed... work for more sticks...you get the idea!

And why does God create sticks...or is that just a notion of ours?

My wife has this unique ability...it's one of her super powers...she has an ability to know when someone else needs a stick...and she intuits the type of stick they need at that exact moment they desire it.

She'll strip the bark off a long straight stick, polish it and varnish it and then hand it to someone to help them walk. For example, her Aunt down south was going deaf! Not sure why, but Medicare does not cover hearing aids?!

When my wife found out from her cousin, she immediately asked her aunt to go to the doctor and she picked up the bill for the hearing aids.

By the way her Aunt owns a great big farm with lots of animals...guess where my son loves to go...and they love his company! That stick fostered a deeper connection!

Or she'll find a pile of sticks and she'll gather them up and give them to someone who can now use the sticks in their fireplace help keep warm.

So she goes to yard sales and flea market and comes home with all this stuff and my response is always we really don't need any more stuff...and her response is always I didn't get them for us...I bought these for so and so...I'm not sure why but I felt that they needed this right now...and they always do!

And Deacon Naomi does something similar with her gifts...she bakes with her heart and gives folks love and comfort through baking their childhood favorites from scratch!

In the Kingdom of Man sticks are very important. In the Kingdom of God people are very important...and with the right heart the sticks can be used to connect the two...it sticks them together!

My wife's gifts stems from the fact that she is always thinking about other people. She remembers what they like, what they need, and what brings them joy...and it's never a matter of how much something costs.

If you take a stick and give it away now the person "sees" the other as important to them. It fosters Connection and Relationship!

The sticks are there to stick us to one another...to connect us in relationship and to aid in connection... especially with strangers or those we don't know very well... especially those at the margins with very little.

I've been to Japan many times and in Japan you always give a gift when meeting someone for the first time. Now here's the thing – it's never about the gift! The wrapping is more important than the actual gift inside. Why? Because in their culture the wrapping represents the amount of time someone actually spent thinking about them before you even met them!

Think about two parents awaiting the birth of their first child. The time they spend thinking about a person they have yet to even meet. The sticks they gather and arrange for that person to feel welcomed, sticks to make them feel belonging and loved before they ever arrive!

People it's all just sticks! But what we do with them makes all the difference in the world!

Where we run into trouble is when the sticks themselves become our thoughts and desires. Turned inward they become greed and envy! Greed and Envy make one's heart "small" turned inwards towards self only...disconnected from others...a heart turned inward shuts others out and ultimately disconnects us from God – there's hell!

Greed is never having enough sticks and Envy is wanting someone else's sticks for our own...see it's your desires turned inwards...a heart turned inwards is a heart filled with fear (a heart turned outwards is a heart filled with love).

And some people work their whole lives chasing and accumulating sticks in large quantities only to find that it was never ever about the sticks. These people miss out on the fruits that this life's journey offers to us all.

Sticks when held loosely and given away foster joy, peace, and love!

God filled creation with an abundance of sticks for our pleasure. But we create artificial scarcity by hoarding them,...we create collectable sticks... and we foster a fear of missing out FOMO to drive up the value of sticks...sticks that have no real lasting value or worth.

And we don't share our sticks for the benefit of all. Some of us have way too many sticks while others have too little or none at all.

And it's only ever just a stick! What's the purpose of sticks? Connections and relationships! When given away they stick us together!

Think of someone else today! Give them a stick! Live into what it means to be called a follower of Jesus...a member of God's Holy family!

It can be even a very small stick...but give it your energy...your desires and your intent!

Think about someone in your heart and place them there... then find, select or buy a stick especially for that person's joy... What are they fond of? What brings them happiness? What stick might they need to make their lives a little bit easier today? Maybe wrap it up special! It can be very small in cost...but make it big in time and energy...put your thoughts and desires behind it!

Now give them that stick. And watch what happens!!!

Notice their body language and feel the vibe and energy around them.

Openness...Joy...then look at yourself and notice the way you are feeling as well...wow! Joy...peace...love! Did you think it was hard!?

Think about the last time you gave someone something from your heart...

Connections and relationships. Joy, Peace, Love (These are the Gifts of the Spirit)

Psychologists actually have studied this phenomenon. The gift giver feels the same, if not more joy, than the one receiving the gift and here's the funny thing they found... if someone else is observing this exchange they also feel high levels of joy measured by a happiness survey along with endorphin monitors...in other words, another person watching this exchange also feels joy! It's how we are wired how we are made. It's why folks watch Hallmark movies.

It's only a stick...but when given away with your heart it creates an amazing bond...it's sticks with everyone involved! We are psychologically wired to give our sticks to one another.

Connections and Relationship...Sticks and People!

What do you do with your sticks...and more importantly where do you focus your thoughts and desires and energies...are you thinking about others "Agape" or only about yourself?

Thoughts create actions... and desires beget new creation.

Sticks and people...what are you doing with the sticks you have been given?

Notice that's why children's gifts are so important...they are created by them...it's not about the cost of it is it...it's the effort, energy and time they spend thinking of you...that's what creates joy for you and conversely them. Refrigerators covered in joy and love!

See I can go out and get me some more money (more sticks)...but I can't go get me some more time.

Time is precious... and once your time is given away...it's gone...unless of course time too is relative and there is something beyond this veil...we like to call it everlasting life!

...and yet even after death...do you ever notice that after someone you loved is gone that a stick that person gave you can still elicit joy, peace, and love!

DeSha has a pair of small emerald earrings that her mother once stuffed at the bottom of an overfull Christmas stocking. Her mother is gone but those earrings can immediately elicit those feeling of joy, peace and love surrounding her relationship with her mom.

A stick is nothing but a stick until it is given away in agape...agape is a love that focuses your thoughts and desires and energies on someone else!

Ultimately your relationships are not about the sticks...but they are only as strong as the amount of time you spend thinking and focusing on the other person...your relationships are only as strong as the amount of time you spend holding the other person in your heart...

... sticks then can become currency in the kingdom of God when they become the outward manifestation of your thoughts and desires for someone other than yourself.

(Jesus said where your treasure is there lies your heart...it's how we're made!)

and sometimes...just sometimes...if your treasures are focused outwardly and given away... a stick may become a symbol and a reminder of joy, peace, and love for someone else! Turned outwardly sticks can change the world!

So start living today...create and spread joy, peace, and love with those we hold in our hearts...and remember...after all...it's only a stick!

Your faithful servant,
carmen