

The Poor Widow by Maerten de Vos, 1602



## Discerning the Right Gift

a Testimony by Linda Thompson

They say that money is one of the top three topics that married couples fight over. Well, after nearly 24 years of marriage, and with much help from Catholic friends, opportunities for faith formation, a natural maturing process, and of course the pure grace of God, my husband Greg and I are blessed to be on the same page when it comes to our perceptions about money, how we manage our finances, our aversion to debt, and our commitment to tithing and sharing. With these preconditions, you might think it would be easy to discern a right-sized gift to St. Mary Magdalene's capital campaign but that was not the case for us.

We knew all along that we would participate in the Capital Campaign. We had discussed this while the building plan surveys and interviews were taking place. We also knew that our participation would be at a "stretch" level. I would like to say that this was because we were so committed to being generous, but the real reason is because our income had decreased by nearly two-thirds when Greg's contract work came to an end in July 2016. While this didn't create any serious financial hardship for us, it did require some budgeting and reprioritizing.

For those of you who like to read the last chapter first and know how the story ends, I'll share that we ultimately decided to pledge the full amount that was requested in our letter from Father Will. But this decision came only after a difficult discernment. My desire to share that story with you now is not about pressuring to give outside your comfort zone and not about providing excuses for opting out or doing less. I hope that sharing our story helps others who are also discerning, but in all transparency I am really writing this for myself. With all the different perspectives we considered, this is my therapeutic way of coming to clarity, acceptance of, and peace with our decision.

Like most everyone, we have had financial ups and downs - some harder than others. As an avid gardener I see God's purpose in those harder times like a much needed pruning, or perhaps more accurately, what I would call a harsh pruning. A harsh pruning takes the plant all the way down to the main supporting stems. When I do this annually to the roses and the grape vines, I know it is good for the plants. From this type of pruning, the roses will fill in with new growth and bloom all summer long. Likewise, the grape vines will take over the fence and produce more bunches of grapes than we'll be able to consume.

Although it took us much longer than a growing season, we too recovered from our harsh pruning stronger, healthier, and bearing more fruit than we had before. Our faith was stronger and more mature; our marriage relationship had moved to a new level of authenticity; and yes, our financial situation recovered too. But more importantly, our perspective about money had changed to better align to Biblical teaching.

Before we received our formal letter from Father Will, we had already discerned a capital campaign gift that we thought was meaningful in terms of the amount, doable given our recently changed finances, and that still required us to give more than what we had already budgeted for the general tithing and the building fund. Imagine our surprise when the amount in the letter was more than double the amount we had already calculated! We understood that

the suggested amount was based on our history with the parish which was based on our former income, and that no one doing the calculations knew of our changed circumstances, but we were still shocked.

You might be wondering why we would allow the amount of the request to impact us at all - it's easy to see that all we had to do was recalibrate the request to match our current situation. We knew that was an option, but have you ever been in a situation where the practical, obvious answer just doesn't feel like the right or final answer? It's like an urge you can't ignore to call a friend or family member you haven't heard from in a while and when you do, you discover that there was an important reason to be in contact.

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When we couldn't feel comfortable with a practical solution, we turned to prayer and scripture.

We considered the parable of the Rich Fool in Luke 12:16 - 21. In this parable, an already-rich man experiences an abundant crop and determines that he should tear down his barns, build bigger ones, and store up the grain. He will then take life easy - eat, drink, and be merry - because he will have enough grain for many years. But God calls him out for the fool that he is and demands his life of him that very night. The parable ends with the warning that this is how it will be for whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.

Contemplating on this parable we were challenged to reconsider how we thought about our own savings. We are disciplined savers - this is one of the reasons that we didn't experience any significant issues when Greg's work

ended. He is in the broad range of age when people often do retire. We knew the work would end eventually and we had planned for it. But were we being like the Rich Fool? Utilizing our savings was one way we could stretch our gift, but was it the right thing? Only God knows how many years of grain we need stored.

Now biblical scholars might say this has nothing to do with money, but my thinking goes straight to the parable of the Ten Virgins in Matthew 25. You know the story - 5 were wise and five were foolish. The wise ones had stored up enough oil to last until the bridegroom arrived, but the foolish ones hadn't, and their lamps ran out!

This Capital Campaign request came along at the time when we had shifted to making sure our lamps would have enough oil to last as long as needed, in direct conflict with the lesson of the Rich Fool and his grain!

The Gospel of Matthew also uses the Parable of the Two Sons (21:28 - 32) A father asked his two sons to go out and work in the field. One said no, but then went out and worked as asked. The other one agreed to go out and work, but didn't. What if we committed to an amount outside of what we had thought possible, and then discovered we truly could meet the commitment? Was it better to pledge less and give more if we could?

I have always loved the Liturgical Seasons and how they help us be intentional about the right things at the right times. The Lenten season is full of opportunities for self-reflection like St. Mary Magdalene's Lenten Study on worship.

In Week 3 of the series, one of the reflective questions was, "What area of my life is most difficult for me to surrender to God?" After much reflective thinking and honest soul searching, I

identified two areas of my life that I hold close - areas where I fear that what God might have planned is not what I really want.

One of these areas is directly aligned to the capital campaign because it is basically the comfortable way in which I live. I shared that after our harshest pruning, several years ago, we had a changed perspective about money. We became more intentional about tithing, charitable giving and sharing. When we did this, we found that we always had enough. In fact, it seemed that blessings flowed abundantly the more that we gave. But the truth is, we never gave until it hurt - we were being generous from what was really our excess. We've never been the widow with the two-pence who gave all she had as described in Mark 12: 41 - 44.

It was the question from the Lenten Study that helped me realize that giving the amount we had been asked to give was the only option that demonstrated an act of faith. All the other ways that we looked at arriving at an amount were more like a safety net than an act of faith. In the end, we wanted to make a gift that reflected an understanding that all that we have comes from God (there is no such thing as a "self-made man") and that we can step out in faith, trusting that God knows what we need.

When I shared my insights with Greg he readily agreed and we pledged our gift.



*Linda Thompson and Greg Tomko, along with their granddaughter, have been parishioners at St. Mary Magdalene for 8 years. When time allows, Linda enjoys writing and reading.*