

Sermon for Sunday 16.09.2007

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at Petri Church, Hannover

Text: Mt 6,1-4

Subject: Money makes the world go around and the church? - 3 Euros Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. It was meant to become a lovely and relaxing afternoon on the beach. That was my intention. I packed my backpack and cycled to the beach. I enjoyed the 20 min bike ride in the afternoon sun. I wanted to buy the Sunday newspaper on my way, when I found that I had only three Euros left in my wallet. No problem, the ATM is also on the way to the beach. Humming, I typed in the PIN. Nothing happened: There was a problem with my cash card - the ATM screen told me. Today I would not get any money from the machine. I would have to wait until tomorrow. I searched my wallet. Maybe I was lucky enough to find a bank note hiding somewhere in the back, tucked away by accident? No luck. Now I had to make up my mind: 3 Euros – not enough for the Sunday newspaper, the ticket to the beach and an ice cream. I had to decide what is really important to me to make my day: the Sunday newspaper, the beach or the ice cream?

Maybe – the thought crossed my mind – I should not spend it at all. How long would it take to fix my cash card problem? Was there enough milk in my fridge – and how about bread? What did I have left in my freezer, just in case it would take even longer? What would I need in the upcoming days that I had to spend these 3 Euros on?

All of a sudden I remembered a girl I met last year at the youth retreat centre where I worked. The group spent their confirmation camp with us. Her parents had given her 3 Euros pocket money for the eight days of their retreat. They could not afford more pocket money. They had even warned their child: “Don’t tell anyone about it.” So this girl had spent a couple of days watching the other youth buying sweets and cool drinks at the tuck shop after lunch and dinner. Some bought ice cream for their friends or shared the sweets with those whom they liked. While watching, she knew that she would have this opportunity only once - spending all her money, her 3 Euros – an amount that some youth spent every lunch time. When we planned an outing she finally revealed herself to a colleague of mine for some of the group were talking about what they would buy in the shops in their spare time. –

And my friends in Zimbabwe? What would they be able to buy with those 3 Euros?

We don’t have to look that far. Do you remember the discussion in the newspapers lately? How much should lunch at the school cost so that all pupils could afford it? 1,50 Euros?

3 Euros – not enough for me to spend the afternoon on the beach as I had planned it, not enough pocket money for a eight day retreat?

3 Euros – enough for two lunches at school or food for a whole week?

3 Euros – what are they really worth?

The Widow's Offering [Mk 12,41-44]

41 Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. 42 But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. 43 Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. 44 They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything- all she had to live on.

Two small copper coins or 3 Euros – it can be everything to live on and not worth mentioning at all, depending on your circumstances! Even though the widow owns so little, she still gives of her money. She does not make a big fuss about it. She simply puts her contribution into the temple treasury. If Jesus had not watched her nobody would have noticed, nobody would have been able to talk about it. She definitely did not expect to be rewarded for her giving by public praise. What a difference when we look at today's world!

There are TV shows to raise money for a humanitarian purpose. At the bottom of the screen you find the names and the amount of money of the people who have called in and contributed. There are oversized cheques that are held straight into the bright light of the cameras with big numbers on it so that everyone will be able to read how much money has been donated. Donations are beneficial for the image of a company or an institution. VIPs support aid agencies and know that it will also help to have good press coverage.

Jesus would not have to go the temple and sit across the temple treasury in order to watch people donating money. He would just have to sit back, open the newspaper or watch TV.

Giving to the Needy

1 Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. 2 So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. 3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

With these words Jesus warned the people whom had followed him to the mountain to listen to him teaching. “Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them.”

These words are like a heading to Jesus' idea on how to live your religious convictions, giving alms, praying and fasting. Yet, the expression “acts of righteousness” might lead us astray for it does carry a negative connotation for most of us today.

“Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them.” When Jesus uses the term “acts of righteousness” thinks of a relationship, the relationship to God. “Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them.” It could also be translated as: Be careful that you do not act the way you do just because you want to be become right in God's eyes that way, that you want to influence your relationship to God with your good deed. Whoever feels that God's recognition works the same way as you earn a good standing with people is wrong. It

is only through the love of God in Jesus Christ that we will receive the recognition in God's eyes that we need to become right with HIM. Jesus' death and resurrection is the only act of righteousness that truly deserves that name, for it will put us right with God. God is not impressed by how well we handle public relation when we donate money or how many people will respect us for our involvement in a good course. God looks at our attitude when we do so.

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What do these words mean to us today? How can we still use them as standards for our giving today? Should we better stop asking for donations and offerings and hope and pray that people will be convinced to give for that purpose?

Many activities and projects would not be possible in our churches today if it was not for generous donors and sponsors, the people who are involved in fund raising, establishing funds etc., if it was not for those who contribute to the offering week by week. It is actually one of my tasks as Geschäftsführerin of the 5. Ostfriesischen Kirchentags to find sponsors who support us financially. So I would be just such a hypocrite as Jesus calls them if I would tell you now that sponsoring and fundraising ... are wrong. It is an important part of fundraising to name those who have donated some money publicly, if they want to do so. If we have to, my colleague and I will also have to receive oversized cheques with the local press present... It would, however, be wrong if any of the donors would somehow get the impression that he or she could influence their relationship to God by giving for a Christian purpose.

Any donation might be good for your tax declaration but for the "declaration" you owe God one day. This fact has to be made obvious to all the people involved. It is also helpful when VIPs use their fame for a good course. How many people would not receive help if it was not for them! Yet those who expect to raise their image in God's eyes will have to think twice about their motives: "I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full," would Jesus probably comment on it. His standards on giving can still be of help for us today, for they have an important hint for today's discussion on fund raising: 3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." Raising funds publicly, we should not forget the needs of those whose needs are not „selling“ well enough by PR standards. We have to look for new donors and not take of the money that those people we ask would have given otherwise. More and more people in our society today need the support of the Diakonie, the local church, the „Tafeln“ to meet their every day needs. We should not overlook them, just because they prefer not to be in the lime light. It is part of our responsibility that their needs are also met.

Lucky me, you might think. I do not need a thank you letter for my tax declaration, I do not need a cheque for the image of my company. I cannot afford giving. Unfortunately, I have to tell you, Jesus' words are not addressed, to the rich only. His ap-

proach to giving is more fundamental than that: “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets,…” he addresses the whole crowd present before him. He does not make any exceptions. He does not only confront those who feel that they can afford giving. He simply says: “So when you give…”, not “should you give to the needy”... For a Christian giving is not an optional extra. Jesus simply sets the standards for everyone’s giving.

3 Euros – not enough for me to spend the afternoon on the beach as I had planned it, not enough pocket money for a eight day retreat?

3 Euros – enough for two lunches at school or food for a whole week?

3 Euros what are they really worth?

On that Sunday afternoon I was suddenly aware how rich I am. I am thankful and hope that I will spend my money in a more thoughtful way.

3 Euro – or any other amount that I have in my wallet on my bank account is not everything that I have. I have also realised anew that there is so much more to my life than the wealth I have got. Especially considering the discussion on rising poverty in our society we have to be aware that we do not reduce the people we meet to what they have got.

With the youth group we discussed the value of friendship. We talked about it why some youth feel that they have buy sweets or other presents for their peers to make them their friends. Another important aspect of my

task as „Geschäftsführerin des 5. Ostfriesischen Kirchentags” is motivating people to contribute to the “Kirchentag” with their music, theatre plays, come up with creative stalls that tell of the diversity of their church life ... “Kirchentag” and every congregation lives of the people who are there and who do not only contribute financially. 3 Euro – what else do I have besides those 3 Euros? Time, creativity, the ability to listen, technical skills, experience, patience...? All those aspects are part of me and you, too. And those I can share as well, I can donate of those characteristics and attributes as my alms. Giving is not a matter of money but of attitude. What could I invest this week in another person’s life?

The peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.