

**Sermon Risk and Restoration-A Stewardship Sermon Mark 12:41-44 (The Widow's Offering),
Rev. Thomas L. Hall, Salem United Church of Christ, Denver, CO**

In our visioning exercises recently several comments were made about wanting more “spirituality” in the church. Now spirituality can be seen in many ways. Essentially, for me to define it, is to give illustrations. Spirituality is connecting with God and with each other. It isn't a one way trip, seeking God, as the early monastics learned; it is living in God's world, relating to each other, and discerning God's leadership in all things. In essence, it is as we learned last week, spirituality is “to love God and to love each other.”

But how do we become spiritual? How do we connect with God, how do we meet God? There are many ways including meeting God in prayer, in worship, in scripture, in community, in service, in everyday life and in the created order. We learn that there are different ways of praying-intercession, petition, adoration, thanksgiving along with contemplative, silent, and meditative. There are different ways of worship and singing-praise, traditional, chanting, the use of incense, lights, candles. There are so many different versions of scripture from the Latin Vulgate, to the Duay, the original Greek and Hebrew, to the popular King James, New International, The Message. Each can have a particular focus on let's say, “men, or women, or teens, or the businessman's bible. Communities are different: some people come to a church and immediately feel right at home: they like the people, connect with the energy and spirit of the congregation while others feel disconnected, disjointed and out of sorts. Meeting God in our everyday life is the same: each of us in our lives can meet God. When we lose a job, have surgery on shoulders or knees, when we face cancer or lose a loved one to an accident, God is there as we open up, cry out, share and listen.

For example, this past week, I was frustrated. I've been here with you 15 months. It was necessary for me to sit down and have a face to face talk with myself and God. While a great deal of progress has been made here in this church-in worship, support, education, outreach, I felt frustrated because in my opinion it wasn't fast enough. Well, you knew who won that argument. Like Job I heard “were you there when Salem was created? Who made these people?” I had to “gulp” and confess that my agenda was not the one to be followed, but God's. Ellie, God bless her, came in to the office and was planning to share some of the same impressions. We had a great conversation. This is God's church. This isn't Tom's or Ellie's, one group or another, this is God's church working to connect in LOVE with God and with each other. Sometimes frustration can be a motivator, sometimes in can be a hindrance. It is necessary to hear the Spirit and to know which one it is.

Then this week, work began on our back yard. The landscaping taking place is like a piece of art. It is a canvas in creation, creating a place of peace and tranquility, a sense of the Holy. My wife and I call our home: Peaceful Dwelling. In Japanese it is “ANGO.” While it would be nice to have the yard done immediately, it won't be. It is still in process, it is still in creation, it is still being formed, developed, shaped and molded, just as the woman with the coins was being shaped, molded, formed for just such a time as when she put those coins in the offering. It was important to her, and to the world.

This past week was also my brother's 68th birthday. I shared with him “on this particular time and place, you blessed the world with your presence. Your birth gave grace to the family and world.” The same is true for all of us. The same is true for Salem.
So what does this have to do with stewardship? Everything and nothing.

Salem is at a point in its life, journey, ministry where there is going to be risk, and where there will be restoration. For those who want more spirituality, consider your gifts of time, talent and treasure to the church. Giving is a spiritual discipline. The widow knew it. Spiritual work, spiritual gifts include the discipline of giving to God in a generous and hopeful attitude. Giving with an attitude of gratitude is often used to express this time of year. We all support other organizations as well, Food Banks, Children's organizations, hospitals, schools. There are so many non profits that provide outstanding services. We support several here: Sewall School, The Urban Peak, and The Gathering Place. But the church is the one organization whose focus is on connecting with God and with each other in love.

Your gifts, your tithe, your offering, no matter how large or small, supports

1, the salaries of the staff, including Ellie, Christine, Vern our custodian and myself, and for substitutes when some of us are away;

2, the cost of the utilities of the church. Just as you need heat in the winter and at other times, like to have electricity for lights and television, running water and the use of the phone, so too does the church, although the church's expense especially for heat and water are much higher. But that will change: we just installed a new toilet in the ladies room, we cut back some on the water useage this summer by having a community garden which used a drip system, and the Master Plan is considering several changes.

3. Office, kitchen, cleaning and maintenance supplies are necessary for ministry, worship, programming. We have to take care of our building.

4. Programs especially education for all age groups in Sunday school, new music, and special events.

It costs each month about \$10,000 to meet our expenses. Sometimes it is less, sometimes it is a bit more. This is \$120,000 a year.

Now Salem is fortunate in that we have fundraising events like the Craft and Bake Sale two times a year along with the Christmas cookie sale help. However, we might consider adding other fund raising activities in the coming year which will enable Salem to become known in the community and through which we can raise funds for the operating budget.

We have donations from organizations that use our facilities of roughly \$10,000 a year.

We have special offerings at Christmas and Thanksgiving but these are from you.

We also have the Crisp-Bruderlind funds which support landscaping.

The bulk of Salem's income is from you who pledge, support, and give of your time, talent and treasure.

This is just the operating budget. Salem is generous in their monthly mission giving. This year we have given over \$3000 in missions.

The widow who put the coins in the offering took a risk. We don't know if that was all the money she had or if she had a cookie jar back home, or if this was the end of the month and the next day she would receive her social security or pay check. We do know that she supported the work of the synagogue with her time, talent, and treasure.

Salem is and will always be a canvas being painted by God. Salem is emblazoned with reds, blues, purple, green, gold, black, yellow and all of the hues in between. We are a beautiful creation here to nurture each of us in loving God and loving all of God's people. We are here to nurture ourselves in the spiritual disciplines, one of which is being a good steward of God's creation and God's church. Amen.