

Hattie May

Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego

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Last Sunday after Pentecost: Christ the King

Stewardship Sunday

Scott Richardson +

Gracious God,

Let these words be more than words and give us the spirit of Jesus.

Amen.

Several themes converge this morning. Today is the last Sunday in the Christian year, the Feast of Christ the King, that moment when we bow in prayer before the One who is both our great high priest and the cosmic monarch. Today is also the Sunday before Thanksgiving, that time when we count our blessings and praise our beneficent provider. Today is also Stewardship Sunday; we have for a month now been preparing to make our pledges to God for the support of the ministry of this cathedral – we'll have a chance to do just that in a few minutes. Let me first gather up these various threads by telling one sad and sweet tale that has been floating about in stewardship circles for years.

Grace Baptist Temple, Philadelphia, December 1, 1912. The Reverend Russell Conwell tells this story: Little Hattie May Wiatt lived in a house near the church in which we then worshipped. It was a small church and was crowded; tickets of admission were obtained weeks in advance for every service. The Sunday school was as crowded as the rest of the congregation. One day, when I came down to church, I found a number of children outside. They were greatly disturbed because they could not get in. Little Hattie May Wiatt had brought her books and a contribution, and was standing by the gate, hesitating whether to go back home or wait and try to get in later. I took her up in my arms and carried her through the crowd into the Sunday school room. The next morning I came by their house and she was going up the street to the school. As we met I said, "Hattie, we are going to have a larger Sunday school room soon." She said, "I hope you will." It was only in my mind, as a kind of imaginary vision, but I wished to make conversation with the child.

The next I heard, Hattie was very sick. They asked me to come in and see the child, which I did and prayed with her. Hattie May Wiatt died. She had gathered 57 cents, which was left as her contribution towards securing another building for the children. I took it to the church and stated that we had the first gift toward the new Sunday school building. I changed all the money into pennies and offered them for sale – I received about \$250; fifty-four of the pennies were returned and placed in a frame. We then received by a sale of the \$250 changed into pennies money enough to buy the next house north of the church. Years later, by again using the symbol of the pennies, the congregation moved to a larger building and

made the first property available for other purposes. In the house purchased by the sale of the 57 cents was organized the Temple College, later known as Temple University.

As the Reverend Conwell came to the end of his sermon that day, he listed the accomplishments of the congregation that, in his mind, were directly linked to Hattie's gift. She was a school-girl, he said, living in one of the homes of the industrious, honorable, upright, and saving classes of society, not of the wealthy and great, yet think how her life was used. A glance at it would put many to shame. Think of this large church (it sat thirty-three hundred); think of the membership added to it – over 5,600 – since that time. Think of the influence of the Sabbath school. Think of the Good Samaritan Hospital; thousands of sick people cured there, thousands of poor ministered to. Over 30,000 people every year go to the dispensary. Think of the very first classes of Temple College; almost 80,000 young people have now gone through – Law, Medicine, Dentistry, Theology, Household Arts, the Normal School, the Teachers' College. Think of it.

Hattie was one of the greatest of earth who accomplished that which leaders of armies had failed to do, and that which kings upon their thrones could not accomplish. Many are counted great, many are given credit for that which they did not do, but here is a life filled with motive power that sweeps on for all time; myriads of powerful influences moving out upon the earth and shaping the course of the world beyond anything we can dream.

So that's the Reverend Conwell's testimony. December, 1912. A couple of weeks ago I was at the lunch table sharing Hattie May's story with my colleagues and, in the midst of the narrative, the pledge cards for this year were delivered. In a light spirit, my friends asked if they should fill one out for 57 cents. I replied that there are two ways to read Hattie's story – it's either about 57 pennies or it's about 100% of all you have. Hattie gave everything she'd saved. No one here is expected to do likewise (neither 57 cents nor 100%) but we are called to honor the spirit of godly concern she demonstrated. Her church had needs, needs that she experienced quite directly, and she felt called to respond.

Your church has needs – a need for more space (hence our continuing support for the Master Plan), a need to adequately pay our hard-working and under-compensated staff, a need to fold our Children, Youth, and Family minister's salary into the budget for the first time (for the past two years that's been covered by a grant). A need to continue to do all the things that make Saint Paul's what it is.

But beyond that, and more importantly, we all have a need to give in the very same way that we have a need to worship, pray, learn, and serve. God shapes our souls through all our spiritual practices; generosity is one of the primary ways in which that happens. So will you trust Christ the King to reign in every part of

your life? Will your Thanksgiving gratitude naturally lead you to share God's abundance with the church and the world?

As you ponder those questions, let me add another layer to Hattie's story. Hattie May's 57 cents wouldn't have done a thing if the Reverend Conwell hadn't figured out how to exploit the story for holy purposes. It wouldn't have done a thing if sharp-minded business people hadn't served on the various boards that directed that congregation's growth. Hattie May did a beautiful and noble thing; the sermon I'm referencing today was preached twenty-six years after her death. In those twenty-six years, wise people understood the power of her gesture and used that to inspire others to be as bold in their vision and their generosity.

We, today, are simply asking you to consider her witness and honor their shared commitment to a robust and serving church. We're asking you to pledge somewhere between 57 cents and all of your material wealth for the building up of this ministry. When you are ready to write your pledge down and bring it forward we'll be delighted to receive it, whatever it is, in the Name of the One Hattie May loved and the Reverend Conwell and many, many others served. Amen.