

# “Pennies from Heaven”

*The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – November 7, 2021*

*Mark 12:38-44*

It's time to do the grocery shopping. Perhaps this is a once-a-week ritual for your family of four. The shopping cart is full — cereal, milk, soda, protein bars, coffee, green vegetables, chicken, hamburger and more. Now you're at the checkout counter and the total is \$319.47. The checkout person asks you a question: “Would you like to round up your total to help support the Community Center's After-School Program?”

Well, hold on. First, you wonder, “By ‘round up’ does she mean round up to \$319.50, to \$320, or to \$400?” Then you learn that she's asking if you want to add 53 cents to your total for a worthy cause. Only a complete dirtbag would say no. So, you say yes.

One organization that uses this fundraising approach is Goodwill Industries with its “Change for Change” program. In Fort Worth, Texas, shoppers raised more than \$295,000 across 25 retail locations in 2020. The program advertises, “You give change, and we will promote change,” like job training for people with barriers to employment.

Goodwill and other businesses understand the power of a penny.

Why all this talk about pennies?

The penny belongs to God. But the penny alone is powerless. It's a piece of copper and zinc. It weighs a mere 2.5 grams. It can be found on sidewalks and streets, in piggy banks, jars, pockets, kitchen drawers, parking lots and around soda machines. But here's the thing: Unless you pick it up, it can't do anything. A penny has no power without a person to put it to work. Make plans for your penny. Put it to work. Let your money serve you. You set the agenda. You come up with the vision. If you don't, a penny is just a piece of loose change.

Here is something else to think about when we think about the lowly penny.

**First, do not pander for the penny.** No need to lust after more money. It could be more trouble than it's worth. Sometimes the more you have the more problems you get.

**Second, do not try to please the penny.** Don't worship the penny . . . worship God. Remember the words of Jesus, *"TAKE CARE! BE ON YOUR GUARD AGAINST ALL KINDS OF GREED; FOR ONE'S LIFE DOES NOT CONSIST IN THE ABUNDANCE OF POSSESSIONS."* (Luke 12:15) To this, the writer of Hebrews adds: *"KEEP YOUR LIFE FREE FROM LOVE OF MONEY, AND BE CONTENT WITH WHAT YOU HAVE, FOR HE HAS SAID, 'I WILL NEVER LEAVE YOU NOR FORSAKE YOU.' SO, WE CAN CONFIDENTLY SAY, 'THE LORD IS MY HELPER; I WILL NOT FEAR; WHAT CAN MAN DO TO ME?'"* (Hebrews 13:5-6)

**Third, do not pinch the penny.** Do not be stingy with the penny. Rather, be generous. Give it away to strangers. Give it to charity. Give it to the church. Keep what you need and give away the rest.

**And fourth, do not fear penny.** Giving away your penny will not thrust you into poverty. After all, it's not about having the most pennies when we die.

When Jesus watched the widow fumbling about in her change purse for the last coins she had, he was curious. He called his students over to watch. And they did — from a distance. Her two coins amounted to a penny. He and the disciples watched her drop them in the collection box. And knowing her situation, they were all amazed. Her bank balance just went from one penny to zero.

Jesus was highly impressed, especially since he had watched the Pharisees put money into the treasury and lots of it. But these were the people who had oppressed the poor widows in the first place. It was ill-gotten gain.

This woman worshiped God with the coins that she had — all the coins she had. Jesus was inspired, and he said, *"TRULY I TELL YOU, THIS POOR WIDOW HAS PUT IN MORE THAN ALL THOSE WHO ARE CONTRIBUTING TO THE TREASURY. FOR ALL OF THEM HAVE CONTRIBUTED OUT OF THEIR ABUNDANCE; BUT SHE OUT OF HER POVERTY HAS PUT IN EVERYTHING SHE HAD, ALL SHE HAD TO LIVE ON."* (vv. 43-44) That widow's penny had the power to inspire.

And inspiration often leads to change. Dr. Uswatte is the principal of Rocky Ridge Elementary School in Hoover, Ala.

And she has a motto: "Take the time to inspire and be inspired." She thought of the lowly penny. She encouraged everyone at her school to offer a penny to anyone who inspired them. She asked the penny giver to say to the receiver, "You have Penny Power. You inspired me. I hope you take this penny and pass it on to somebody else." It's like paying it forward with a focus on inspiration.

And then the kids started bringing pennies to school!

The Forbes article quotes her as saying, “It was so moving. They were giving them to teachers and telling their teachers how much they appreciated them. They were giving them out to their aides, to our custodians, to their parents. It was like a love fest!”

The lowly penny that first produced inspiration had now generated change. The Penny Project began as a means of sharing respect, acknowledgement, and inspiration in the community, but grew into a movement that changed or improved the culture of civility.

Many retailers have seen the power of a Penny Project. They invite us to donate our change for charity. They understand the power of micro-donations, whether it is pennies, nickels, dimes, or soda cans for the recycle rebate.

What can our congregation do with a penny? Nothing if we don't personally put it to work for the Gospel. So, the real question would be, what can God do with what you have been given. Are you waiting for a large chunk of change before you invest in the ministry of the church or are you willing to risk your pennies to see what God can do? The power of a penny might bring life to an entire community! Amen.