

“The Widow’s Mite”

Mark 12:38-44

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The text before us this morning is one we ministers typically haul out and dust off this time of year PRECISELY because of its theme. You see, the month of November is that time of year when churches usually conduct their stewardship campaigns. And, of course, what better story do the Gospels provide us with than THIS story. After all, here we see Jesus praising the generosity of a poor widowed woman for surrendering EVERYTHING THAT SHE OWNED, for giving up ALL THAT SHE HAD- and solely for the glory of God. It seems patently obvious that our Lord was encouraging his followers to be no LESS generous in their OWN lives- or WAS he?

I contend that instead of illustrating for us the meaning of faithful stewardship, it is REALLY about its OPPOSITE- that it CONDEMNS churches for the way they conduct their stewardship programs, ESPECIALLY when they try to manipulate the poor for their own enrichment, when they endeavor to squeeze whatever money they can from those members who barely have enough to live on. The story doesn’t begin with the entrance of the poor widow onto the Temple scene to present her own pledge card. No, it begins several verses BEFORE that, when Jesus is teaching his disciples about the pride and vanity of the religious leaders who demand the best and think nothing of enriching themselves at everyone else’s expense. He warns them: “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”(vv.38-40)

Jesus had just seen a wealthy priest parade into the court of the Temple and then deposit a large offering into one of the thirteen metal boxes with a slit on top for people to place their contributions in. Those containers had little signs atop each one to indicate where those funds were to be used: one for building maintenance, one for utilities, another for the priests’ salary, and still another intended for widows and orphans, and so forth. All the while, people crowded around to see who was contributing what. The priest, dressed in purple and fine silk, slowly removed his checkbook from his coat pocket, wrote out what people could see was a very substantial check, and then deposited it into one of the treasury bins. He did it in such a way that everyone could see how much money he was giving so it could be said what a generous man he was. Jesus was repulsed by this display of ostentation and wanted his disciples to understand that this was NOT the way people were to give, that such a self-regarding display would earn the IRE, not admiration of his Heavenly Father.

While people were admiring the man for his gift, an elderly widow appeared. Totally unnoticed by everyone--except Jesus—she slowly made her way to the treasury box and, looking terribly embarrassed in light of the offering made by the priest only moments before, dropped in two small coins that collectively were worth less than a penny- the least valuable coins at the time. This gives Jesus the opportunity to turn this scene into a teaching moment. He points out the differences between the two, that where the rich man, who loved to parade his generosity and good works before everybody for the praise and glory it would garner, gave but a small

percentage from out of his great wealth, the woman, whom we are told was a poor widow--one of the lowliest social positions of that day--gave everything she had IN SPITE of her own impoverished situation. The poor were the largest class in the ancient world and widows were among the POOREST of the poor. To be widowed meant not only losing someone who was loved, but more tragically, it meant losing the one person on whom you were totally dependent. Widows were thus forced to live off the good graces of other male relatives and anyone in the community who might provide a meal here or a little money there.

Well this woman not only gave EVERYTHING she had but more compellingly, her offering came from an UNDIVIDED HEART, that is, she gave not one but BOTH coins- the last bit of money in her possession. In other words, there was nothing half-hearted about her gift. Where you or I might have parted with ONE of the coins at most (and then hated ourselves afterwards for being so darn “generous”), she obviously trusted that her God would MORE than meet her needs. To Jesus, such faith made this poor, anonymous widow INFINTELY more commendable than all the checks the proud priest could ever write.

Now let’s be honest with each other for a minute. Whenever these verses are preached, we’re accustomed to hearing the minister focus almost exclusively on the widow and her great faith and almost never hear about the ostentatious and self-serving display of the rich priest. You see, this woman becomes very useful to preachers, especially at stewardship time when we’re trying to encourage people to support the following year’s budget. We like to use this story to generate guilt among our members and to emotionally manipulate them to give more generously instead of seeing it as God’s indictment upon OURSELVES for our OWN pride and greed. We insist that this woman serves as a model and inspiration to all of us, that God would have us give with the same degree of selflessness, the same kind of undivided dedication that she did if WE are to be faithful individuals ourselves.

In my sermon two weeks ago on Reformation Sunday where we looked at Luther and the significance of the cross in his theology and for the church, I mentioned those popular television preachers who preach a corrupted form of the gospel- what is popularly referred to as “the prosperity gospel.” It is a message in which the viewers are promised that if they only sow a seed of faith by sending x amount of dollars to them, God will honor those givers for their faith and subsequently all their problems in life--including all their financial woes--would supernaturally disappear: “If you only pray right, live right, and then send me the money,” they say, “then God will bless you with success, happiness, and financial security beyond all your wildest imaginings.” I spoke of how they portray God as a genie or giant ATM who will dispense unlimited blessings whenever we ask of him. The corollary of course is that if you send the money and your problems STILL persist, then it’s your OWN fault and not God’s- you just didn’t exercise enough faith (or perhaps hadn’t sent enough money). Meanwhile, what these televangelists are REALLY doing is lining their OWN pockets- conning poor and unsuspecting persons into subsidizing their private jets, their fancy wardrobe, their huge mansions, and their luxury cars. God can’t be very happy about THAT!

Now while most mainline ministers wouldn’t distort the gospel in this manner, still we will try to encourage our congregations--especially those LEAST able to afford it--to increase their giving, to dig deeper and go the extra mile. We assume that even for those struggling to make ends meet each month, for those on fixed incomes or left without any form of health insurance; for the single-parent who has been raising the kids all by herself or the person who

after distributing hundreds of resumes STILL can't find a job, they're STILL able to give SOMETHING back to God- or at least we TELL ourselves so.

But is that what the text is actually trying to say? You see, what the Gospel writer Mark is doing with this text is not so much praising the widow for giving everything she had but condemning a religious institution that would go so far as to take a poor widow's very last penny. He is drawing attention to the unscrupulousness of the scribes whom he says "devours widow's houses" and warns us against doing likewise. He is condemning an unjust system that leaves this poor woman with only two copper coins and suggests that she surrender even THESE- all she has to live on. More than a pious contrast between the pride of the priest and the humble and generous faith of the widow, Jesus is lamenting here a state of affairs that allows such inequalities and injustices to continue. He is judging the Church and those LEADERS who instead of serving people with the kind of humility and faith evidenced by this widow, use their position to aggrandize themselves at everyone else's expense.

Hence, this lesson really focuses the preacher on HIM OR HERSELF as well as the INSTITUTION he or she presides over. It forces ministers to ask questions about their OWN stewardship and the way they use their OWN money. It calls the church, not to TAKE from the poor, but rather to PROVIDE for them. The responsibility of the church is ultimately not to look after its own maintenance and preservation but ministering to the needs in the neighborhood in which it is set. How easy it is to forget that the church is the only institution in the world whose mission and reason for being is not for ITSELF but for OTHERS. The scriptures clearly show that God has always had a special regard for the poor, ESPECIALLY for widows and orphans. Like the widow in this morning's story, she was almost universally dependent upon others and defenseless against those who would defraud her or steal her property.

To remedy this, the Law of Moses declared that one shall not abuse any widow or orphan, while a curse was proclaimed upon anyone who would deprive the widow of justice. The Law included all sorts of safeguards or social nets designed to ensure that a widow would not become destitute and starve. For example, there was the provision of the triennial tithe. Instead of the tithe being brought to the sanctuary, in the third year it was brought to and deposited in the local town so that the widow who lived there might "come and eat and be satisfied." At harvest time, a landowner was not to return to his field for a forgotten bundle of grain, nor was he to go over his olive tree a second time once it had been beaten, nor was a vineyard to be picked twice. In each case, whatever remained after the first act of harvesting was to be left for the widow. Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Zechariah decried how the widow was shamefully oppressed- a situation that hardly changed during New Testament times. THIS is why Jesus made persons such as the widow of Nain so very central to his own cause and why he declared that they must be no less a special object of concern for the People of God, his Church. We are to love them, to care for them, protect them, and to serve as their advocate for without us, they often have NO ONE!

I think you know that the widow in this story epitomizes much more than an elderly woman who has lost her husband and any possible means of support- she represents the elderly POOR, the elderly LONELY, the elderly AILING, the elderly in NURSING HOMES EVERYWHERE. The widow, in this scene, is a classic representative of any and all who have ever been left marginalized and powerless. THEY are our constituency and the ones we need to continue reaching out and ministering to. Otherwise, we become no better than those rich, self-

serving priests who love to parade their religiosity but never lift a finger to help those who truly need it. As Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount, such persons will have no reward from their Father in heaven.

The story ends before we know what happens to them. Unlike Paul Harvey, we're not told "the rest of the story." Probably the scribes returned home to a sumptuous dinner while the widow ate whatever scrap of food was laying around. I can bet she never learned that Jesus used her as an example of great faith or had any premonition that two thousand years later, the world would still be talking about her very simple but exceedingly generous act of love- I'm sure she never even thought her offering WAS generous. In contrast to the "prosperity gospel," we can only assume that until the end of her days, life continued to remain hard and difficult for her, that it was a real struggle to survive from one day to the next. Still, I can't see her feeling sorry for herself, blaming God for her situation or cursing her fate. Instead, I see her praising him at every turn for whatever mercies he may send her way. I see her faithfully journeying to Jerusalem, repeating week after week the same custom of presenting her offering in the Temple there. And while STILL feeling terribly embarrassed for the paltriness, the meagerness of her small gift--a contribution of a few pennies—I ALSO see her continuing to earn the love and admiration of a very pleased God. Let us pray...

*Lord God, you have entrusted this world's good to our care and responsibility. Help us to keep always in mind the larger interests we serve with our management of your wealth, and may we like the widow in the Gospel, manage all we have --beginning first with our OWN LIVES--to your purposes, to your honor, and to your glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*