

The Gift
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Mark 12:38-44

As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!

40 They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury.
Many rich people put in large sums.

42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.

43 Then he called his disciples and said to them,

“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.

44 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.”

TWO CENTS OFFERING

Every month we take up our Two Cents a meal offering. Many of us look forward to it because quite frankly we love to see the little children take up the collection. They get to be a part of the worship service, and we get a chance to see a lot of cute kids.

But, of course there’s another more important reason to take up this offering.

A hundred members in a congregation contributing two cents a meal will give \$180 in a month.
That's \$2,160 a year from pocket change.

This modest effort is still one of the most successful programs in the Presbyterian church. The Presbyterian Hunger Program relies heavily on this offering and through this program we are able to give money locally, nationally and around the world to alleviate hunger.

If this proves anything, it proves that just a "pennies worth of faith" can change things. Or to put it another way, our "two cents worth" really is important.

I think of what Jesus told his disciples.
If they had faith only the size of a mustard seed, they could move a mountain. God can take just a little and do a lot with it. (Matthew 17:20)

So, today, on our Two Cents a Meal Day, it seems appropriate that we read about the woman who put two small copper coins in the temple treasury. And according to Jesus her gift was greater than it looked.

TEMPLE OFFERINGS

Jesus and his disciples were watching as people put money into the temple treasury.

There were thirteen chests scattered around the temple in which this particular offering was taken. Each chest had a large trumpet like opening on top of the chest.

Priests stood by these receptacles. And every person making an offering was required to say how much they were giving and the ritualistic purpose that it served.

In this way the priests could determine if the offering they gave corresponded to the requirements of the law.

So, it was not secret what people gave. And I suspect publicly disclosing what people gave made some people more generous.

It's kind of like some of the schools that I attended. The alumni magazine lists every quarter who gave and what they gave in an effort to gain more generous support.

Apparently this tactic worked in ancient times as well. Some rich people were able to give very impressive offerings.

Can you imagine the scene?
The priest would say,

“Mr. Smith gives a thousand dollars for ministry to the poor.”

And then Mr. Smith would come forward with a bag of heavy coins (no folding money in those days) and throw them into the trumpet chest with great fanfare.

Heads would turn.
People nod in appreciation.
But, Jesus didn't seem to take much notice.

THE WIDOW

And then this widow appeared...so poor that all she had to give was two small almost worthless coins.

I wonder if she almost felt ashamed when the priest announced what she had to give. She was giving the minimal amount. It was actually unlawful to give less than what she gave to the temple treasury.

She gave the smallest amount allowed.
But even this small amount was all that she had.

Her offering barely made a sound as she tossed it into the trumpet chest. No one noticed; no one except Jesus.

For Jesus her offering was an example of great sacrifice. He called his disciples and pointed her out. He said,

“This woman has given more than all these other guys. They gave out of their abundance. She gave all she had.”

Literally, this phrase reads, “She threw in her whole life.”

This widow gave all that she had and in so doing she trusted in God alone to watch out for her. And by the grace of God, the Savior was watching.

IN GOD WE TRUST

In God we trust. That’s our motto, and I’ve always found it appropriate that we put that phrase on our money.

We trust too much in our money, and we trust too little in God.

This widow was special because she trusted in God more than money.

Out of her poverty she gave everything to God.

All her chips were all on the table.

She was betting totally on the grace of God.

But, there is more to this gift than meets the eye.

Her gift foreshadows the gift that Jesus is about to give. Jesus will give everything on the cross.

He will even give his life.

And so the poor widow is a sign of the gift that is about to be given. Paraphrasing the words of the apostle Paul, Jesus “was rich, yet for (our) sake became poor, so that by his poverty (we) might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:9)

In other words, Jesus gave up everything on the cross that we might be saved. God’s forgiveness in Christ redeems us from our sin. And so we are rich in faith and grace.

GRACE AND GRACIOUS LIVING

And our knowledge of this great sacrifice, this great gift changes how we live today.

Paul wrote that our attitude should be the same as that of Jesus. He was the Son of God, he but humbled himself by becoming a part of our world. He even died for our sins on the cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)

And so the sacrifice of Christ provides a pattern for us to follow. We give sacrificially to others because Jesus died for our sins on the cross.

The salvation that is ours in Christ Jesus is the basic motivation for our giving. Because of his grace we become gracious people.

These past few weeks in our stewardship minutes for mission we've talked about why we should give. We share a common ministry. Our offerings support the work of the church.

But, when we dig down to the core of why we give we can sum it up in one word, gratitude. We give out of gratitude for the salvation of God as revealed in Jesus.

God gives us a heavenly treasure that is not subject to the ups and downs of the stock market. God gives us an eternal treasure that is not subject to theft or decay.

And the only way to receive that treasure is to open our hands and let go of those things that we love too much, those things that are keeping us from reaching out to God.

TRUST

It all boils down to trust.

Where do we place our trust?
What is the basis of our security?

These are big questions.
And often the answers are revealed more in what we do than in what we say.

Theoretically we know where our security lies.
From an early age, we have memorized the "right" answers when it comes to the promises of faith.

The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want.
 Don't be anxious about tomorrow. Trust in God today.
 If God is for us, who can be against us?

We can repeat the promises.
 But, sometimes we don't stand on these promises.

THE SCRIBES AND THE WIDOW

There's a great contrast in this passage between the scribes and the widow.

The scribes dress like religious people.
 They wear long robes.
 They want everyone to know that they are the holy ones.

They revel in getting the seats of honor at banquets.
 They love being treated with deference in the marketplace.

They know the right answers when it comes to God, and they want everyone to know that they got an "A" on their theology exam.

They talk the talk.
 But unfortunately, they don't walk the walk.

They recite long prayers.
 But they aren't shaped by them.

They know the great commandment, to love the Lord with all your heart and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself.

They just don't follow the great commandment.

According to Jesus, they devour widows' houses.
 (That's shorthand for saying that these religious leaders use their authority to pretty much take everything these helpless people own.)

I wonder if the scribes were doing something to make widows feel obligated to give more than they could afford.

MESSED UP RELIGION

Maybe when Jesus sees a widow giving away the last two coins she has to rub together, he doesn't see an example of good stewardship (and something that we should copy). Instead, Jesus saw how messed up their religion had become.

This woman out of faith was willing to give all that she had. But, her earnest faith had been manipulated by a religion that had become corrupt.

She was one of the poor that should have been supported by the temple offering. And yet, here she is giving all she has to live on, her whole life.

Somehow these religious leaders used their religion to gain economic advantage. The God they really trusted in was money, and that was going to lead to their destruction.

Jesus doesn't mince words. He tells them that they will receive the greater condemnation.

The extent of that judgment becomes radically clear in the passage that follows our lesson for today. The beautiful temple will be totally destroyed. Not one stone will be left unscathed.

The destruction of the temple will remind the people what the prophets have said all along. True worship is not about ritual and glory. True worship is about justice and mercy.

This is a lesson that we must learn as well. If the church does not produce the fruit of justice and mercy, then we too will be in danger of judgement.

Once again we encounter a common theme in the gospel of Mark.

The religious leaders don't have a clue; while those on the bottom rung of society show great faith. The rich who give out of their abundance are shown to be poor while the poor are rich in faith.

Jesus is trying to show the religious leaders and us that trusting in wealth and big buildings is utterly foolish.

SEEING THE SACRIFICE

The woman and her gift is an example of great faith but it is also an example of how God sees and cares for those who struggle on the margins of life.

Jesus calls attention to this woman because he sees her. He understands the depth of her sacrifice.

Jesus cares about what happens to this woman. He recognizes that her very existence is threatened. And he will not allow her to be ignored any more, especially by those who take advantage of her under the guise of piety.

If Jesus hadn't noticed the woman, no one else would have noticed.

The religious elite parading around the temple wouldn't have noticed. The rich dropping in their token offerings wouldn't have noticed.

And I doubt the disciples would have noticed her either. Jesus had to call them and point out what was really going on.

But, God was in Jesus.
And Jesus noticed.

GOD'S GIFT AND CHALLENGE TO US

You see in the final analysis the real point of this passage is not what the woman gave or what we might give. The real point of this passage is about what God in Christ gives us.

When we come to the end of our rope, when we are down to our last dime, when the world caves in on us and it doesn't seem like anyone notices, we learn that God sees us and that God cares.

And this gracious Lord invites us, as Jesus invited his disciples long ago, to really pay attention to what is going on in the world.

He challenges us to wake up and see, really see each other as we struggle to have faith in difficult circumstances.

Instead of blindly following the ways of the world we seek the kingdom of God that comes.

We seek the kingdom in which the one who is down to her last penny is the one whom God notices and cares about.

We seek the God who will do anything to save her
... and us

...even to the point of sending his Son to die for our sins on a cross.

He gave everything, his whole life on our behalf.

And on account of his life, death and resurrection, we now we have a hope that is eternal.

What is our response to such a gift?

BEYOND SURVIVAL

In the Book of Order, we in the Presbyterian Church put it this way,

“The Church is called to be a sign in and for the world of the new reality which God has made available to people in Jesus Christ.”

How do we do that? Our polity spells it out.

“... healing and reconciling and binding up wounds

... ministering to the needs of the poor, the sick, the lonely and the powerless

... engaging in the struggle to free people from sin, fear, oppression, hunger and injustice

... giving of its substance to those who suffer

... sharing with Christ in the establishment of his just, peaceable, and loving rule in the world.

The church is to undertake this mission *even at the risk of losing its life.*”

Some of you may have noticed Mike Slayter’s book review in the e-letter this past week. The title of that book sounds like something from a crime scene investigation, “Autopsy of a Deceased Church.”

For some of us this title describes the very thing that we fear the most. The decline in faith and church attendance has been well documented by recent surveys.

Many churches don’t need to read survey results. They see the decline on Sunday mornings.

And this is led many in the church to focus solely on survival. They ask, “What can we do to remain a viable church in a secular world? How can we pay the electric bill and the water bill and keep the building in good repair?”

Of course those are questions that we need to answer. But, sometimes congregations in their anxiety about the future focus only on those survival questions, and they forget about who they are called to be, the Body of Christ in the world.

Ironically, in the church, the more we focus on our own survival, the more likely it is that we will die.

The more we are willing to risk everything for the kingdom of God; the more likely it is that we will grow and thrive.

To put it another way, congregations as well as individuals must learn (as Jesus put it) to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Him.

Those who seek to save their life will lose it.
And those who lose their life for the sake of the gospel will be saved.

May God help us get beyond survival and trust our whole life to God’s gracious care. The example of this widow and more importantly the example of Jesus point the way.

Amen.