

Sermon on Mark 12:38-44
24th Sunday after Pentecost, November 8, 2015
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

I'm not preaching a stewardship sermon today. Whew! I can just see the relief on all of your faces: as a collective sigh is heard throughout the nave! Not because you don't need one! And not because the Church doesn't need faithful stewards supporting the ministry of the gospel through this congregation! It's because the scripture lessons don't lead us to talking about giving offerings of money to the Church! Even though Jesus points to a woman – a widow – who comes to the Temple and gives her offering to the Temple treasury, two copper coins which represent ALL that she has – to the shame of the Scribes and those rich folks who give 10 times that much, but could afford to give much, much more. This is not just about her offering, or ours. The gospel lesson is about how God has given you, me, and the whole world EVERYTHING – even God's own Son, as Jesus offered his whole LIFE for us – and invites you and me to give our whole life to God, in thanksgiving. Now, don't you wish that this sermon were merely about giving your offering today – even if God asks for a whole 10 percent of what you have received first from God, out of your abundance? Because wouldn't that be so much easier than giving your WHOLE LIFE TO GOD? Seriously!

So let's go back to the beginning, and look at the scripture before us today. It's the famous story of the "Widow's Mite." I remember it from way back when I was in Sunday School as a child, and the poster our teacher showed us of a woman reaching out her hand with coins in it, to drop them in the Temple offering box, in front of Jesus, his disciples, and the Temple scribes. It takes place in the midst of the confrontation Jesus had with the Temple authorities, which culminates next Sunday in chapter 13, when Jesus foresees that the Temple itself will come tumbling down, stone by stone – and nation will rise against nation. (Which actually did happen – 40 years later, when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem.)

So, we have this famous text in front of us. There are two ways in which can go in interpreting this gospel lesson for preaching today:

- 1 – We could hold up the widow who gives all she has – two copper coins, worth just a penny - into the Temple treasury, which was designated for the poor. This is the way the Church has usually interpreted this passage, and so we often use this story to inspire one another to give, following the widow's example;
- 2 – Like Jesus, we could challenge the scribes and compare the rich negatively (who only gave a "tip" out of their great abundance) to the sacrificial giving of the widow, who gave all that she had to God. It's Jesus' condemnation of the Temple system, which conspired to burden the poor while further enriching the wealthy.

So what is the context for this story? Jesus was teaching in the Temple – speaking in parables, like the Parable of the Vineyard, when the wicked tenants killed the representatives of the vineyard’s owner, even the owner’s son, as he foretold his own death. His adversaries, the Herodians, had earlier sought to trap Jesus by asking him if it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. So in today’s lesson Jesus challenged the scribes – who wore long robes and loved to be recognized on the streets, and enjoyed the best seats in synagogue and were honored at banquets. Jesus said that the religious establishment “devoured widows’ houses” – even as they recited long, flowery prayers to impress the people. (Whoa – careful there, Jesus!) Then Jesus pointed out this poor widow, who gave two meager coins, all that she had, to God through the Temple treasury – her two coins, one measly penny – were more than the rich gave out of their great abundance.

Compare her with the Rich Man from chapter 10, who knew the commandments and obeyed them, but lacked one thing: he was unable to give up his wealth and give his many possessions to the poor, so he walked away sadly – and he didn’t follow Jesus. But in contrast, this poor widow, who only had two copper coins to her name, gave it all to the Temple treasury, in order to help the other poor who had nothing.

This is a bold, public condemnation of the Temple leadership – how the treasury that the Temple collected consumed the resources of the poor – what little means they had, the poor felt obligated to give. Was Jesus being political here?

This seems to “ring a bell” when we think about what’s going on today in America. In comparison, recent studies by the Chronicle of Philanthropy show how LITTLE wealthy people give (in proportion to their great wealth) versus how MUCH people in poverty share with others, for the common good. Although the wealthy obviously give more in total (as they control most of the resources), those making more than \$200,000 per year gave 2.7% of their income to charity, while those who earn less than \$25,000 gave 7.7% of their income! And the wealthiest Americans gave 4.5% LESS of their income in 2012 than in 2008, while those making less than \$25,000 gave 16.6% MORE. While the rich are getting richer, as a group they are giving LESS; and while the poor are getting poorer, they are actually giving MORE. Who is more generous? Just do the math! And why is this? Because people with low or modest incomes know how others suffer from poverty, and often dig deep to help their neighbors. This is a lot different than donating for a new wing to a hospital or university, for the recognition.

So, back to the Bible. The widow in the gospel is an echo of the woman in the Old Testament lesson, the “widow of Zarepath” The prophet Elijah had been sent to Zarepath by God during a great famine, where God said a widow would feed him, so not to worry! It was a time of a great contest between the followers of the Canaanite god Baal, and those of Yahweh, the God of Israel and Judah. King

Ahab of the northern kingdom of Israel was making overtures to worshipers of Baal – he had married Jezebel, the princess of Sidon – and Elijah was to be Yahweh’s champion. Yahweh commanded Elijah to go to Zarephath to live, which was in the region of Sidon. Elijah met the widow at the edge of town, where she was gathering sticks to make a fire for her and her son’s last meal. Elijah asked her for some water, and some bread to eat. Although she had very little – she was poor, and lived close to death in the midst of famine and drought – she offered what little she had, as an act of hospitality to Elijah. But Elijah told her not to be afraid, because this would not be the last of the meal or the oil that she had left. So she baked the bread, and offered it to this stranger of another tribe and faith. But the story ends with a miracle, as “*the jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke to Elijah.*”

The widow in the gospel whom Jesus encountered reminds us of that widow of Zarephath, in her poverty and in her faith. Despite the fact that she had nothing else to live on, she offered all that she had left to God – through the Temple treasury, as an offering to the poor as commanded by the Temple. What else could she do? If the circumstances of life, and the expectation of the Temple authorities directed that she pay the tax, despite her poverty, then that is what she did. Plus, this treasury was designated for her poor neighbors and friends.

Against this reality of an ancient world that seemed to conspire against widows who struggled to survive without the help of husband or family, we hear the psalmist shout praises to God:

Hallelujah! Praise the Lord, O my soul!

I will praise the Lord as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

Put not your trust in rulers, in mortals in whom there is no help...

Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help,

Whose hope is in the Lord their God;

Who made heaven and the earth, the seas, and all that is in them;

Who keeps promises forever;

Who gives justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger.

The Lord sets the captive free.

The Lord opens the eyes of the blind; the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;
the Lord loves the righteous.

The Lord cares for the stranger;

The Lord sustains the orphan and widow, but frustrates the way of the wicked.

In both the Old and New Testament scriptures, God is clearly the champion of the vulnerable, the poor, the widow and the orphan, over against the wicked, and the princes and rulers who are of no help whatsoever.

So, what do these passages from scripture, and the gospel text today, have to do with you and me today? And do they have ANYTHING to do with stewardship, and how we should live? I'm glad you asked!

First of all, it is clear that God cares about the lives of all the human beings God has created. God especially cares about the most vulnerable, those who are suffering from hunger, sickness, homelessness and poverty. So we know that because God cares about women and children who live in poverty and hunger, that we are called to care as well - for we have been baptized and called to follow Jesus as disciples. And God cares enough for the rich to challenge them to change.

The example that the widow in the gospel story gives us is not just an example of sacrificial giving, to give us guilt because we could never give everything we have as she did. (Although we do recognize that there are many who are poor who have learned how to share as a survival skill, whose compassion for others and the sharing of their own meager resources far surpasses the giving of those who have far much more to give, but don't (like you and me, perhaps!).

But the greatest example the widow gives is that "she gave all that she had" out of faith, trust and love for God and neighbor. It foreshadows how JESUS gave all that he had, HIS VERY LIFE, for you and me – for the whole world! In one more chapter in the gospel of Mark, we see how Jesus' adversaries – the Pharisees, scribes and the Temple authorities – conspired to have Jesus arrested and killed. Jesus gave his life so that you, and I, and the whole world would have life!

In the end, isn't that our true stewardship? If we think the point of this story is to follow the widow's example and give all that we have to the Church (or at least increase our giving) WE HAVE MISSED THE POINT! It's really about how you and I are called to give our whole lives to God – just as God has given us our whole lives, and Jesus gave his life, being willing to give his life for the sake of the world, to give US LIFE! God cares about us, and God invites you and me to care about others as well, by sharing what God has given us. It's like the poster I saw recently which says: *So you want to put Christ back into Christmas? Then feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and set the prisoners free!*

Whether this means giving our last coins, or all of our life savings to God, I don't know. Giving it to God doesn't equate necessarily to the Church! But I do know that Jesus is calling you and me to follow him as disciples, which means to imitate him as best we can, with faith and trust in our Creator. This means showing extravagant, lavish, generosity to other human beings who are in need (not blindly, but with wisdom and good purpose) – and working to change the economic systems that make some rich and others poor.

But one important thing that we can never forget, is that *everyone has something to contribute*. The billionaire and millionaire have potentially a lot to contribute to the common good, but so do you and I. But most important to realize

is that the widow with two copper coins has something very critical to contribute as well – and that is *all that she has – her whole life!* That's the example that counts: the giving of our whole lives, our whole selves, to God – not to LOSE our lives, but to GAIN our lives – with the TRUE LIFE that lasts forever. And this is what Jesus calls and invites – implores us all to seek, and to give. In the name of Christ. Amen.