

SERMON: On Abundance and Poverty
TEXT: Mark 12:38-44

11-7-21

This story is commonly known as “The Widow’s Mite,” and what we tend to focus on is that this poor woman gave all that she had. But I noticed something else that I hadn’t realized before. And, frankly, it makes me nervous. Listen again to verse 41: “Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and **watched** the crowd putting money into the treasury.” Can you imagine? We haven’t passed the plate in over a year, but you can remember what that’s like. Now, imagine that Jesus is in the room. And he’s watching. Perhaps Jesus is even bringing the plate to each one of us individually. Imagine him standing in front of you. Holding the plate. Waiting. Looking into your eyes. Looking at what you put in the plate.

I guess if I already had something in an envelope it wouldn’t be so bad. But to think about pulling something from my wallet or writing an amount on a check - while anyone is watching me - makes me squirm. It reminds me of Big Brother. Let’s be honest, it makes me feel guilty. Like I’m not doing enough. Not giving enough.

If it makes you feel guilty, too, I apologize. That's really not my intent. Guilt may be an effective motivator for the short term, but it fails in the long term. It's manipulative. It's disrespectful. It doesn't inspire; it only pushes people away.

So, I want to be clear that guilt is NOT the response that Jesus is after, either. He does not shake his head in disappointment at the widow's measly coins. He does not shame her for not being able to give like the scribes and the rich people.

Instead, Jesus lifts up this widow as an example for the others to follow. Jesus reframes the scenario to show that *she* is the generous and faithful one. Not the scribes with their long robes and long prayers. Not the rich people putting in large sums of money.

But before we learn more about the widow, let's look more closely at the scribes. The scribes are arrogant. That much is obvious. But while they are assumed to be pious and are respected because of their position, "they devour widows' houses." Now, arrogance – while distasteful – doesn't necessarily harm

others. But Jesus points out that these scribes are guilty of much more than thinking too highly of themselves. *They devour widows' houses.*

A contemporary theologian commented: “[The scribes] not only fail to provide for the weak and marginalized, they exploit them, the very ones they are called to care for and protect. More than praising the widow for giving all she has to the temple, Jesus is condemning the temple economy that demands that even those who have nothing give everything.... The widow should *not* be giving all she has to the temple treasury. The scribes of the temple should be giving from that treasury to care for the widow.” (Jill Duffield, *Looking Into the Lectionary*, The Presbyterian Outlook, November 5, 2018)

The scribes are essentially talking the talk, but not walking the walk. They say all the right words and are respected in the marketplace. They have a title and a position that demands respect, but their treatment of others flies in the face of the God whom they worship and the scriptures they profess.

This is a scenario that plays out over and over again in the Bible. “God’s prophets and God’s Son reserve the harshest judgment for those who profess belief in God all the while exploiting, oppressing, and hurting those already suffering. Scribes, Pharisees, unjust judges, woe to those who do not extend compassion, mercy, and tangible care and protection to widows and orphans.” (Jill Duffield, *Looking Into the Lectionary*, The Presbyterian Outlook, November 5, 2018)

They try to hide behind their riches, but no amount of money can make up for a lack of justice and mercy.

“Beware of the scribes,” Jesus warned, “who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 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.”

Jesus then turns his attention to the poor widow, who contributed to the treasury “everything she had, all that she had to live on.” Her measly coins are worth so much more than the riches given by the others. Her gift is a true sacrifice.

Even though I have preached on this story a number of times over the years, I studied it again, reading commentaries from different perspectives. And I discovered something I hadn’t realized before. This poor widow with her two small coins was helping to maintain the lavish lifestyle of those high and mighty leaders who looked down upon her. She was contributing what little she had to the very institution which oppressed her.

Her gift was a sacrifice, nonetheless, and perhaps an expression of trust that went beyond the temple to God. The One for whom the temple was intended. The One who remained faithful to the Chosen People despite their hard hearts and their constant failings. The One whom she worshiped and in whom she placed her faith.

“Those coins represent more than money,” wrote one Biblical scholar.
“They represent faith and belief and how these must be lived out in our lives in

concrete acts and not solely by rituals that no longer hold religious power.... The coins represent faith-filled offering found in presenting all of who we are and all we hope to become to God for service to the world.” (Emilie M. Townes, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor)

A number of years ago I read a story about a 9-year-old boy who lived in rural Tennessee. One Saturday afternoon, a church bus stopped in front of his house, and a pastor came and knocked on the door. When the boy answered, the pastor asked to speak to his parents, but the boy told him that his parents take off every weekend and leave him and his little brother home alone. The boy invited the pastor in and their conversation led to the boy revealing that he'd never been to church.

The pastor then shared the story of Jesus and his love for all people. He came back the next morning to help the boys get dressed, then took them for breakfast and to church. The boy was in awe as he looked around that big building. He and his brother sat and wondered what was going on around them, especially when some men began passing a wooden plate down the aisle. People were putting money in. The boy also wanted to add something, but his pockets were empty, so

he passed it along to the next person. When he saw the ushers coming forward with the plates, the boy grabbed one and carried it to the front of the church. He set it on the floor and then stepped into the center of it. He lifted his head, saying, “Jesus, I don’t have anything to give you today. It’s just me. I give you me!”

You see, it’s really not about the money at all. I probably shouldn’t be saying that during the month when we ask you to pledge an amount for next year, but it’s true. We put *ourselves* in that offering plate. Jesus is looking into our eyes and into our hearts for genuine commitment, humility, and generosity. How much of ourselves are we contributing to the treasury of God’s kingdom on earth? How much of ourselves are we willing to invest toward justice for the orphan and the widow, the poor and the oppressed?

We take up an offering during worship because it is an act of worship. It is an expression of our gratitude for all God has given us. It is a statement of our faith and trust in God. It is a symbol of our dedication to God’s work in our world. It is a recognition of God’s call upon our lives and our answer to that call. It is an acceptance of our responsibility and our commitment to work as a church to

change the systems of oppression and injustice, systems that keep the poor widow down and that pad the wallets of the wealthy.

Jesus is watching as we contribute to the treasury. He is watching and waiting and wondering if we will give of ourselves. May we rise to the challenge, may we answer the call, may we step into that offering plate and give our all... to the glory of God!

AMEN.