

“The Widow and the Temple”

Mark 12:38-44

The simplest and most expedient thing to do this morning with this text from Mark, especially on the Sunday of Stewardship Dedication, would be to say, “Look at this widow and follow her example – give generously, give till it hurts,” and leave it at that. If I were to do that I would be following in the footsteps of countless others who have taken a similar approach with this text. The poor widow in this story has come to the aid of ministers and stewardship committees often and regularly. She has played a leading role in countless stewardship sermons in which she has been held up as a supreme example of giving.

And, in fact, at one level anyway, she is. There is something inspiring about her example, giving all that she had. Jesus does appear to praise her, contrasting her gift to that of others who gave out of their abundance, while she gave out of her poverty.

Indeed, it is often the case that it is those who are less well off who are more ready to share what little they have. According to data from the IRS from some years back, generally speaking, people in lower income brackets give a higher percentage of their income to charitable organizations than people in higher income brackets.

A woman named Shirley Kaigler who grew up in Detroit recalls the lessons taught her by her parents about giving. She says, “If I had a dime, a nickel of it went to the church.” Today she is a lawyer, married to a dentist, and has much more means than her family had when she was little. “But her sense of obligation toward helping those who have less is just as strong.” She says, “I believe that as you’re moving forward, you have to have your hand reaching back to help someone else.”¹

So yes, there is something commendable and exemplary about the widow in the story who gives even though she has next to nothing. She was, in fact, a living example of the kind of behavior that Jesus encouraged in the Sermon on the Mount: “When you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others....But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret....” Matthew 6:2-4

She comes quietly, unobtrusively, and drops in her two small coins, the last that she had, we are told. No trumpet fanfare. No announcements. No one offered to name a building after her. It was just a privately conceived and privately executed act of generosity.

The Apostle Paul encourages this same kind of giving in one of his letters: “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” 2 Corinthians 9:7 In other words, it is a private matter. It is between you and God.

And I love that part about being a cheerful giver rather than a reluctant giver, or one who gives under compulsion. The Greek word is the same word from which we get our word “hilarity.” Giving with a sense of cheerfulness and hilarity! What a concept! In a book by Michael Durall entitled, *Creating Congregations of Generous People*, the author quotes fund-raising consultant Ashley Hale who refers to a happiness scale. “Some money is sad money, some is happy money. Sad money is paid as a duty or a penalty. Taxes, debt-payments, fines--these are paid with sad money.”

Happy money, on the other hand, is money that we use in some way that brings us a sense of satisfaction or enjoyment. Maybe it is buying a new car or a new article of clothing or new furniture. But it can also be happy money that we put in the offering plate or give to another charitable organization.

My sincere hope is that when you fill out your pledge card or when you write out a check to the church, that you do it with at least some sense of satisfaction. I hope that you are glad to be part of this church, that you like what we do here, that you enjoy the fellowship, are stimulated by the worship and the study opportunities, that you appreciate the ways that the church reaches out to those beyond our walls, both here locally, and through our denomination to people in many other places on the globe. I hope that it gives you a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment to know that your gifts help make all of this happen. And therefore, maybe to a small degree anyway, that you give with a sense of cheerfulness.

In an older version of the Book of Order, one of the tasks entrusted to the Session was to cultivate in the members of the church what was called “the grace of liberality.” The task of the Session was to cultivate the grace of liberality or generosity in the members of the church. That is what we have tried to do in recent years. We have talked a lot more about giving as an expression of our faith and of our gratitude to God, than we have about the needs of the church.

What the mood of the widow was as she dropped in her two last coins, whether she was cheerful or not, whether those two coins represented happy money or not, we have no way of knowing. But the traditional interpretation alone in which she is seen as an example of giving, leaves many troubling and unanswered questions. Are we to believe that Jesus would watch a woman who is destitute put her last remaining meager resources into the temple treasury, leaving her absolutely alone, vulnerable and helpless and have nothing to say about that other than to praise her generosity? That the one who showed concern for those living on the margins would have nothing to say about her plight and how it was that she found herself in this desperate situation? And even more curious, would Jesus praise her for contributing her last remaining resources to the temple that he consistently criticizes for being part of a corrupt system of exploitation?

We actually have two stories about widows this morning – this one from Mark, and Ruth in our first reading. Both of them allude to the desperate plight of widows in Biblical times. When we hear the word “widow” today, we have no concept of what it might have been like to be a widow in Jesus’ day. A widow in our day may have trouble making ends meet, but normally can fall back on a number of resources including possibly her own savings, her own pension, joint property she owned with her husband, and societal safety nets such as Social Security.

Those of us who have read the book we used for last month’s book group, *Infidel*, got some glimpse into what it might have been like for a widow in Biblical times by reading about what it is like for women in fundamentalist Islamic societies today. In some places a woman is not allowed to travel or to shop alone. A woman must be under the protection of a man. A woman without a man in that society is vulnerable.

That was the way it was in Biblical times. Women were completely dependent upon men and if they did not have a man to protect them and provide for them, they were in serious trouble. They could not inherit property from their father and unless their husband had made a point of leaving his property to his wife, it did not happen. If we are to read this story only as an example of giving and ignore the reality of this woman’s situation, we may be guilty of sentimentalizing the story, and of making poverty sound noble and romantic instead of what it is, harsh and unrelenting.

There are some very strong clues in the context of this story suggesting that Mark, the Gospel writer, is thinking about her plight as well as her gift. One important clue comes immediately before telling about this widow when he warns about the scribes. Listen again to what he says: “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 honour at banquets!”

Someone here is probably thinking, “Well you wear a long robe.” Yes, I do. I’m not sure I get greeted with respect in the market place (that would be Wegman’s, wouldn’t it), but not with disrespect either. As for places of honor at banquets, I would have to say no. That doesn’t happen. I’ve found that for the first month or two at a new church the folks say, “Pastor, you and your wife come up here to the front of the line.” After that, you are on your own!

But it is the next part that concerns us. Jesus goes on to say about the scribes: “They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.” They devour widow’s houses! How that might have happened we can only speculate, but there is the charge. And the charge comes just two sentences before the story of this widow. It is difficult to ignore. As one commentator puts it, instead of caring for this widow as the law directed them to do, they were robbing her of her last dime.²

The other important clue comes immediately after this story when Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple. When one of his disciples points out the large stones of the temple, Jesus says that not one will be left upon another, but all will be torn down. Mark has chosen to tell the story of the widow at the very end of Jesus’ public ministry. There are no more stories about Jesus in Mark after this. From here he moves into the passion narrative where we discover that Jesus is prepared to give his all as well, everything he has, his life. And Mark has chosen to surround this story of the widow giving the last of her meager resources to the temple with two very negative references to the religious establishment. First, a warning about scribes who devour widows’ houses, and then a prediction that the temple would be destroyed.

What all of this means to me is that while we may find in this story an inspiring example of sacrificial giving, we cannot help but to find in this story an indictment of a system that ignored or even exploited the weakest and the poorest and the most vulnerable. Which says to me that if we find an example of giving and use that example to encourage giving to the church, then on the other side, we must also hear the other message of the story that after our dollars have been dropped into the offering plate, we need to make sure that those dollars are being used to minister to the real needs of people.

We need your help, not just to keep the church functioning, but to help us reach out to those in need. We spent a lot of time at our retreat recently talking about just that. What are the needs right around us? What more can we be doing to reach out to the vulnerable in our own community? I hope you will help us think about those in our society who represent the widows of Jesus’ day and how we as a church can reach out to help.

¹ The Chronicle of Philanthropy, “*How Americans Give*”, 5/1/03

² Texts for Preaching – Year B, p. 584