

Mark 12:38-44

I don't like to preach about money and I guess most pastors don't either.

Perhaps we like to avoid this text because its message is hard for any of us to hear, hard for both preacher and congregation.

It reminds us of how much more we all could and should be doing for God.

So this morning let's try to overcome our reluctance and deal with the meaning of the widow's offering for us today.

This story holds three lessons for us that we may discover

by

focusing on each of the three personalities involved:

Jesus, the disciples and finally the widow.

First let's look at Jesus. The context here is important.

The setting is the temple in Jerusalem during Jesus' last days on earth.

After this incident, which is the last in his public ministry,

Jesus spends his time exclusively with his disciples.

Most likely he had come out of the Inner Court of the Gentiles and sat down on the steps facing the Outer Court of the Women, into which both men and women were allowed to come and where the temple treasury was located.

Over against the long wall were thirteen large metal containers called

"The Trumpets" because they were shaped like the bell of a trumpet upside down.

As people came to worship in the temple, they would deposit money in these containers, voluntary contributions to cover the cost of the daily sacrifices there in the temple.

Each of the thirteen containers were marked with a letter of the alphabet, indicating whether its money would be put toward the corn, wine, oil, incense or wood for the sacrifices.

It was Wednesday of Holy Week, the last day Jesus was to be in the temple. That Monday, he had cleansed the temple of the moneychangers who had made this house of prayer into a den of robbers. On Tuesday, there in the temple he had dealt successfully with the trick questions posed by the Pharisees and Sadducees to entrap him. Today, he had just come from his final confrontation with the temple's religious leaders. Before leaving the temple forever he sat down and for a while watched the worshippers make their donations. Here, in contrast to the corruption and hypocrisy of the temple leaders, he found a pure act of worship offered by a poor widow as she deposited "two very small copper coins," the smallest coins in circulation in Palestine; their value was, as the text puts it, "only a fraction of a penny." Among all the wickedness which dishonored his Father's house, here was true devotion to God, a pure act of worship. God is honored by sacrificial giving. He does not count up the value of the gift, like we do, but rather he counts up its cost to the giver. God is not impressed by the size of a gift, but by its sacrifice. Jesus said, "This poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others." The Pharisees would have looked down on the little she offered, but Jesus honored what she gave. She "put in everything-all she had to live on."

This is a difficult teaching for any of us to hear. Someone has suggested that a good way to tell about us is to examine our monthly bank and credit card statements. In this way we can determine what we value and what we are willing to spend hard cash on. So Mark pictures this scene from Jesus' last days in which he was examining the bank statements of his contemporaries as he was sitting in

the temple “where the offerings were put.”

Isn't that strange?

He just sat there and watched for a while.

Many people came by.

The Teachers of the Law marched in, and with great fanfare they dropped in their offerings with the “clink” of the gold against the offering box.

The Pharisees strutted in, and with all eyes on them tossed their silver coins into the treasury.

The splash of colors and the noise of metal had created quite a show. People were quite anxious to see what everyone was putting into the offering box.

But then an old woman shuffled in.

She did not want any notice and probably would have been embarrassed had she known that Jesus was watching.

She had no gold or silver to bring, no jewels to dazzle the eyes of the observers, just “two very small copper coins.”

Second, let's look at the disciples.

Jesus is so touched by this poor widow's devotion that he called his disciples around him to open their eyes to her and adjust their thinking.

Notice that Jesus did not criticize the rich who gave out of their abundance.

The rich were paying their tithe and doing their duty to support the temple which required such large gifts to operate.

But the disciples, like others of that era, thought of wealth as a sign of God's favor, and the rich as God's special people.

This was very similar to the prosperity theology of today where adherents believe that God wants believers to be richly blessed in this life and that physical well-being and material riches are always God's will for the faithful.

Jesus shook up his disciples, saying that this poor widow put in more than many rich people.

God doesn't see things just the way we do.

By valuing this poor widow's gift more than those of the rich,

Jesus was showing his disciples a glimpse of God's point of view. The disciples were not to judge others, because God alone can see into the human heart.

What may be for us only minimal expectations may in others demand grace and self-denial, not only in money, but in attendance, in attitude and Christian living.

What Jesus praised was the spiritual condition of the widow's heart, not merely her gift.

Third, let's look at the widow.

In ancient Jewish society, widows were excused from giving anything to the temple treasury.

These women were considered extremely poor because there were no social benefits for them, no food bank to go to.

This poor widow could have forgotten about the temple and its needs, but she didn't.

She contributed out of love for God.

She gave out of a sense of love and not because of the pressure of others.

This is the reason why Jesus suggested she was rich.

Although she was a poor widow, she had not lost her love and concern for God and for people.

She did not worry about what she did not have.

She did not spend her time complaining about her situation.

Instead, she showed us something important and vital for healthy living; namely, use what we have in love, even if this consists of

“only two very small copper coins.”

Whatever it might be, it is enough.

God counts us rich when we give out of love and when our giving costs us something.

A 1000 dollar donation to the church from a millionaire costs this person very little.

The absence of the money may not even be noticed.

But a hundred dollar donation by another person may be costly.

This poor woman had found strength in worshipping God and comfort by trusting him.

When she praised God, her eyes were lifted up above her own problems and for a moment were focused on the beauty and glory of God.

She did not want to take joy in worshipping God without supporting the place of worship, so she gave her whole money for that day, drawing more strength from God's presence than even from food.

By this gift she put herself entirely in God's keeping, for faith in God includes faith in the future.

This widow did not know what the future might hold, but she knew that her future would be in God's hands (Ps. 31:14-15a).

She knew that whatever might come, God could be trusted to take care of her and would "meet all (her) needs" (Phil. 4:19).

He was her faithful provider: "Yahweh Yireh," as he was known to her in Hebrew, "Yahweh Yireh," which means "the Lord will provide."

This faith made her rich toward God.

The essence of faith is to realize our complete dependence on God.

It is easy for us to get caught up in the routines and worries of daily life that we feel we are doing everything ourselves.

We forget that our hearts are beating one moment to the next only because God is causing them to beat about 100,000 times in a day.

Every day God gives us the breath of life.

As we seldom do, this widow really prayed, "Give us today our daily bread."

We are not so much to copy this widow's gift as to imitate her faith.

We are encouraged to trust him that he will take care of us.

When we experience the joy she found in worshipping God, the strength in praising him and the peace in trusting him, the appropriate gifts will follow naturally.

The widow's faith made her rich toward God.

You and I are consequently called to such a faith.

We can be rich toward God when we give out of love.

We can have more than we imagine when our giving costs us something.

And we are rich toward God when our actions, including our giving, come from faith.

Riches, you see, are far more than money.

Amen.

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux ended his sermon on this text, traditionally is known as “The widow’s mite,” with this prayer: “Lord, I have but two mites, a body and a soul. I give them both to thee.”

In the hymn “Take my life, that I may be consecrated, Lord to thee,” we sing in the second verse, “Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold.”

Here, “mite” does not refer to an insect-like organism that causes irritation to humans, like a dust mite, but to a very small sum of money. When the Bible was translated into English under the auspices of King James I of England in 1611, the smallest coin minted then was the “mite,” worth only an eighth of a penny.

© 2024 Horst Aechtner. All Rights Reserved.