

“The Widow’s Mite”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 27, 2020

Scripture: Mark 12:38-44

³⁸As [Jesus] taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.” ⁴¹He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then 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. ⁴⁴For 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.”



Sermon: *“The Widow’s Mite”*

In this morning’s New Testament passage, Jesus speaks critically of the scribes who love long robes and notoriety and choice seats at banquets. They give long prayers to attract attention to themselves and perhaps most damning of all, Jesus says they “devour widows’ houses.” Those long robes were the sign of a man of power and leisure. Like Joseph’s coat of many colors, it was the kind of robe in which a person could neither hurry nor work.¹ [The Scribes] also liked to be greeted with honor and with respect. They liked to be called *Rabbi* which means “My great one.” And they liked the most important seats at banquets. At a banquet, you could tell how important a guest was by how close they were seated to the host.²

That image of powerful men who like the attention their faith brings them, is juxtaposed against this widow, who by virtue of her womanhood is almost invisible in this culture, with no power, and few rights. Without fanfare, she furtively drops in her two small coins, then silently walks away. And she would have likely gone completely unnoticed, had Jesus not been sitting across from the donation box watching. We know almost nothing about her except that she is widowed and poor, yet Jesus praises her tiny offering because it’s not just something she had to spare. It is everything.

So why is this story important for us today? Why do we talk about this unnamed widow every year during pledge season? Why is she an exemplar for stewardship in the church?

Well, it’s not just that she gives, because everyone that Jesus observes approaching the offering boxes gives: rich and poor and middle class. Bringing an offering does not make the widow unique.

And it’s not just the amount she gives, either, because the monetary value of her offering was inconsequential. The two “lepta” that she dropped in the box amounts to roughly 48¢ in today’s money.³ You can’t do much with 48¢. With a million dollars or a thousand dollars or even a hundred dollars, you could buy food for the hungry, shelter for the homeless, medicine for the sick, clean drinking water for those who have none. But with 48¢, I doubt you could even buy a cup of coffee. So, her gift was not the point of the story because it really didn’t amount to much.

And the point is not even to lift this woman up as an example because she gave all that she had. Jesus has always expressed concern for the poor and has just spent the preceding verses criticizing the scribes and the Pharisees and the religious authorities, in part, for cheating widows out of their money. I wouldn’t think he would then praise a poor widow for giving all she had and leaving herself destitute in the process.

No, this story is not about who or what or how much. This story is about the woman’s attitude toward giving; that even when she had nothing to give, she still gave because it was THAT important to her. She was a part of the worshiping community, and the worshiping community was a part of her, and that made giving to the Temple reflexive, automatic.

Some things in life are like that. We respond out of reflex, without even having to think about it. In a restaurant, when the server says “Enjoy your meal,” I automatically reply “Thank you.” When they say “Thank you,” I say “You’re welcome.” When they say “Have a nice day,” I say “You too!” It’s automatic. But sometimes they don’t say what I’m expecting at the times I expect it. That’s when I have awkward exchanges like “Have a nice day,” “You’re welcome!” and “Enjoy your meal,” “You too!”

That is why the unnamed widow in this story gives to the temple even though she has very little to begin with: because she couldn’t imagine not giving. Her giving is a reflexive response. It’s automatic. And the reason it was automatic is

because the worshiping community was an important part of her life. The temple was her spiritual home, her connection to God, an expression of God's grace, and therefore she felt a responsibility to support it.

That is one of the principles that characterizes our relationship to the church today. We are a part of it and it is a part of us. I think of the church like a family. We get along sometimes, and we squabble sometimes. But at the end of the day we are a family. There are parts of being the church that we just can't do without each other. And like a family, we all chip in together to make sure the bills get paid, our commitments get met, and the work gets done. The health and well-being of the church is a responsibility shared by all of us. The worship is yours. The mission is yours. The programs, the building, they are yours. This church is not a place that you come to. It's a part of you and you're a part of it.

But there's another part of her giving. She is willing to share what she has even though she has so little because she knows it comes from God in the first place. She is merely returning to God what has come from God. And that can be a hard concept to grasp because we have a tendency to think in terms of what "belongs to me" and of "what I've earned."

When I started driving, my parents decided to let me use our ice blue 1982 Nissan Sentra. It wasn't my car, but I got to drive it to school and football practice and work. I was a conscientious enough driver, but it got on my parents' nerves when I would leave it in the driveway without gas, or leave my fast food trash in the floor boards, or forget to turn the radio back down to a sane volume level. Whoever drove after me always got a host of fun surprises. So, my parents sat me down and explained that while they were letting me use the car because I needed it, the car still belonged to them. I was welcome to use it, but that privilege came with the responsibility to take care of it.

It can be easy to forget that what we have is not our own. Scripture tells us that all the world, and everything in it, belongs to God. That means our wealth, and our possessions, and our abilities are all gifts from God, and the privilege of having them comes with the responsibility of using them in ways that honor God. God put the church here to embody God's will on earth. God put us here to be the church and to live into God's will here and now. We move towards accomplishing that when we use the gifts God has given us for the work to which God calls us.

In a few weeks we will be making some decisions about the budget of Overbrook Presbyterian Church for next year. We will be making decisions about what commitments we can make over these next twelve months, and which ones we cannot afford. Your pastors, your session, and your stewardship team are asking you to pledge to support your church; to make a commitment to set aside some of that with which God has blessed you, for the work of your church.

I know that for some, the talk of money is uncomfortable. For some, stewardship is a dirty word. For some, your money is your business. But Jesus talked about our money and how we use it more than any other subject. That means the gifts God gives us and how we use them in service to God, are as important as any other thing we talk about in the church.

So often we see the church as something outside ourselves that makes demands on us. Or as a place we visit, or as a provider of services that we consume. But the church is us. It is our gathered community loving and serving God together. This church is our responsibility. Like the widow before us, our giving back to God should be as important as anything else we do.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion in this world, and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Mark*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975. 299. Print. Daily Study Bible Ser.

² Barclay, pg. 300

³ Hare, Douglas R. A. *Mark*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996. 164-5. Print. Westminster Bible Companion. [Hare notes here that 2 lepta equal about 7/10 of 1% of a denarius which was one day's wages. 48¢ is computed using the 1/1/2020 Ohio minimum wage of \$8.55/hr over an 8-hour day.)