

Our Only True Hope

Rev. Nancy Willet
Mark 12: 38-44

Stewardship Series #4

FPC Uvalde
November 22, 2009

As I was searching for a Scripture for this final stewardship sermon, I thought of this passage we just read—some call it the story of the widow's mite. I thought this would be a great passage to cap off this series and leave us all on a good note concerning stewardship.

However, as I began my research and prayed for several days about this passage something came to light for me that I had not considered in the passage in Mark before. I began to not feel so good about this reading. Well, I decided God had laid this passage upon my heart for some reason, so I decided to plow ahead and see what bubbled up.

First I want to talk about the scribes—that is where this passage begins—with Jesus teaching “beware of the scribes, 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!

Earlier in the Book of Mark, you can read where Jesus had taught that those that want to be first must be last of all and servant of all. These scribes were acting totally counter to Jesus' teachings and Jesus saw right through their quasi-holy ways.

I guess what struck me when I was reading about the scribes was that I may have a little bit of scribe in me as well! Look at what I am wearing! I go around in my long robe and my fancy stole. People do treat me with respect wherever I go and most times I am given a good seat at dinners I go to.

The difference between the scribes and clergy today, though, is that the scribes were not paid like we clergy are paid a salary. They lived on subsidies from some of their students, they took a little out of the poor box, and every once in a while they made a little “ATM” run to the temple treasury.

The problem was, they were not satisfied with those monies. Scribes were the elite in the society, the doctors of law, the official interpreters of God's Word. They were the religious professionals that were set apart to counsel and guide the people. They were people of honor, so they had to act and dress and appear the part.

So, when they thought their money was running low, or they just didn't feel like spending their own funds, they wrangled invitations to people's homes for meals—always sitting in the best seat, taking the choicest cuts of meats and drinking the best wine the host could offer. They went often to

poor folks' homes, because they invited them a lot. It was an honor to have a scribe come to your home. To have a scribe visit your home lent an air of importance to your own name.

They especially liked to visit widows' homes—I'm not too sure why because widows had the least to give of anyone. Jesus said the scribes actually "devoured widow's homes."

There was no such thing as a rich widow in 1st century Palestine. All widows were poor *because* they were widows. They were nobodies; they were almost invisible to society. Nobody really paid them any attention—except the scribes, I guess when they wanted a meal, and Jesus on this particular day.

Now I'm getting to the part of what didn't feel too good to me regarding this scripture. If this story happened today, how would we regard the widow?

If we knew of a widow today who only had say, \$1.00 to her name and she wanted to give it away to some traveling evangelist, or a preacher she watched on TV—and I'm not talking of any one particular evangelist, but one that we think might not be too above board, one that we think may be a little bit corrupt within his organization—would we lift her up as a model of giving, or would we tell her not to give away your last dollar to a corrupt system?

Jesus had just condemned the scribes and basically the whole system of being corrupt. And here was this widow giving away her last two coins to this system. The problem with this text for me is, do we see a model for giving in this widow, or a tragic example of how religious institutions suck the life out of people? I humbly submit to you today, that I believe it might be a little of both. I will let you come to your own conclusion on that problem.

With or without those two small coins the widow put in the temple treasury she was still going to be poor. She was still going to be dependent upon someone else—usually a male from her husband's family. When you are that low on the economic scale, giving isn't the problem—those two coins wouldn't do a thing for her anyway. Giving wasn't the problem—getting was the problem.

So why would this widow give away everything she had? I believe it is because her coins represented much more than just money to her—which is good because they were only worth about a nickel in our money today. Her coins represented a faith and belief that represented all of who she was. Our pledges and offerings represent that same thing. Our offerings represent all we hope to become to God for service in the world. It is not so much an act of giving, as it is an act of being. These coins were an expression of what was happening spiritually in this widow. The scribes faith was in their power and wealth—the widow's faith was in God.

Notice that Jesus never does commend or praise the widow for her sacrificial offering. He simply says they are worth more than the scribes who gave more, but sacrificed less. “He invites his disciples to sit down beside him and contemplate the disparity between abundance and poverty, between large sums of money and two copper coins, between apparent sacrifice and the real thing. He does not put anyone in the wrong. He does not dismiss the gifts of the rich” (*The One to Watch*, B.B. Taylor).

And why was this example important to Jesus? Barbara Brown Taylor said because “It takes one to know one.” “The widow reminded Jesus of someone. It was the end for her; it was the end for him, too. She gave her living to a corrupt church; he was about to give his life for a corrupt world. She withheld nothing from God; neither did he” (ibid.). The widow’s gift prefigured Jesus’ gift of all of himself on the cross. Her gift transcended her circumstances.

This story, like most of the stories about giving away our money tends to make us uncomfortable, doesn’t it? I know it does me. I think part of those feelings come from where we give. We give out of our abundance and not from a state of poverty. It’s hard for us to even imagine giving away the last two coins we might have to our name.

I read a story about a pastor and his wife who took a confirmation class to a worship service in Chicago. He wanted his class to experience African-American worship. He said like good Presbyterians, they sat in the back, but as soon as they were acknowledged as guests, they were immediately ushered to the front pew. This is quite in line with one of Jesus’ other teachings—remember? Those that want to be first must be last of all. I guess that’s why the back of our sanctuary always fills up first, right?

When it came time for the offering, the minister who was the guest wasn’t quite prepared, so he glanced at his wife who quickly put a five-dollar bill in his hand. He thought “good, this will get me through.” He said he was taken aback, though, when they started to collect the offerings in trash cans, and they expected to fill them! But the big whammy came, though after the collection of all the offerings and the pastor of the church reached in the trashcans and began to read the names on the checks and what they gave. He was mortified! To think that someone might be looking at that very private act of giving. On top of that, when you think about it, it might be Jesus who was looking!

Since that day in Chicago, the minister said, he realized that his practice of giving is not personal, between him, the church treasurer and the bookkeeper.

There is another one present when we make the decision on giving, and that is the Spirit of Jesus. He knows our abundance and our gifts reflect it. He knows the portion with which our lives are blessed, and he also knows the proportion of our gifts.

We may feel like the widow at times, but in reality, very few of us are like her. Sure times are tougher than usual. Some of you may move down the chart this year and still be tithing 10% of your income. But most of us have more than two copper coins to live off of.

In this story, the widow was the one who was truly blessed. Because of her poverty, she realized she had nothing. And because she realized she had nothing, she cast all her hopes in God's hands. When the cold winter days came or the day when she had nothing to eat, her hope was in the Lord.

I encourage you to tithe this year, not because the church needs your money. And this will probably make our treasurer cringe, but the church doesn't *need* your money. The only thing the church needs is the grace of Christ, the love of God, and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Tithe for your own spiritual benefit. Tithe because our only true hope is in the Lord. Trust in God and the blessings will be eternal. Amen.