

“The Widow Offers All”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA
2 th Sunday after Pentecost – November 8, 2009
Mark 12:38-44

I have to admit to all of you that when I realized what today’s Gospel lesson was, I groaned. I didn’t want to preach on the widow and her coins. Partly because Michael used this story for the Bible study portion of the stewardship sessions, so some of you have already heard a very thoughtful reflection on this passage, and I didn’t want to repeat that. But mostly I didn’t want to preach about this lesson because I just don’t like it. Don’t get me wrong - it’s a great story. It’s just that the widow and her selfless giving make me feel guilty. Hearing this story makes me think that what I pledge to the church isn’t good enough because I’ll never be able to give all I have just like the widow did.

Feeling guilty doesn’t turn me into the nicest person. I have all kinds of uncharitable thoughts about that woman. Why would Jesus praise her? It’s not like she could have done anything else with her coins. What did she have to lose? Two lepta wouldn’t even buy her part of a loaf of bread. Her coins were worth less than two pennies are today. If all you have is two pennies, why not give them to the church? It’s not like you can buy anything real for them. Might as well give them away.

Then, when I look at the widow in the context of the first part of this passage, I get even more frustrated. Jesus says that the scribes are devouring the widow's houses, which suggests that the scribes are encouraging these women to give all they own to the Temple. Why is the widow giving the last of her money to a corrupt institution that's taking advantage of her? Doesn't she know any better? All through the Hebrew scripture we hear God's commandments to care for the poor, the orphan, and the widow, and yet in this story, the widow is giving to the Temple that is supposed to be taking care of her. Why doesn't she use a little common sense and try to take care of herself?

While I'm on my rant, I'm not particularly pleased with Jesus in this story either. He praises the widow for giving two tiny coins, saying that she's given more than those who were contributing out of their abundance. Haven't we heard in Deuteronomy about how we're supposed to give to God the first fruits of the harvest? We talked last year in our stewardship groups about how God has blessed us abundantly and how our response should be to give out of that abundance. God didn't say, "Give me all the fruits," just the first fruits. So why aren't the rich people's gifts acceptable? Does Jesus really want us all to empty our bank accounts when we give to the church?

All of these thoughts were going through my mind as I grumbled to myself and began thinking about my sermon. Grumble, grumble, grumble. Nothing's good enough for Jesus, is it? Poor people get all the attention in the Gospels. Jesus is even condemning people who walk around in long robes. That doesn't exactly bode well for us priests.

Fortunately spending more time with this passage encouraged me to stop my whining and look a little more closely at what's really going on in it. Jesus didn't say these things to make people two thousand years later feel guilty. He didn't say these things so that people would give more to a stewardship campaign. Jesus didn't even say these things to the rich people or the widow. He said them to his disciples. His disciples had already given up everything to follow him. They had given up homes and families and jobs. They had given up their old lives to seek a new life with Jesus. They didn't need a lesson on giving.

So what is Jesus saying?

In the first scene, I think most of us would be willing to heed Jesus' warning to be wary of those who seek praise and honor for themselves while taking advantage of the poor of society. It's also a good reminder to those of us in the church that our role is to serve others, not to seek glory and accolades for ourselves.

In the second scene, Jesus sits down opposite the treasury to watch the crowd bringing their money. He notices the rich putting in their large amounts, and he notices the widow with her two copper coins. It is the widow he lifts up.

One of our challenges when reading this text is to resist comparing ourselves to people in the story. Jesus isn't holding up the widow's selfless offering so that we'll feel bad about ourselves. Jesus is holding up her offering so that the disciples will understand that it is not the amount that matters.

What matters is that she gave all she had to God. Her giving doesn't appear to be out of a sense of duty or obligation or guilt. Her giving doesn't seem to include resentment or suspicion about how her offering will be used. Her giving shows her trust in God over and above whatever corrupt practices the Temple may be engaging. Her giving shows her certainty that her offering, no matter how small, is worthy in the eyes of God.

Can we know all that simply from the widow's offering of two coins to the Temple treasury? Probably not. But Jesus helps us. As he tells his disciples, so he tells us, because we are his disciples, too. He tells us that she gave out of her poverty. Her coins don't just represent the money she gave to the Temple. As one commentator said, "They represent faith and belief and how these must be lived out in our lives in concrete acts."¹

We don't need to worry about how our offering compares with someone else's. We don't need to worry about whether our individual offering can reduce the mortgage or pay the salaries or feed all of the hungry. We don't need to worry if we don't have the same gifts or talents to contribute that someone else does. We don't have to worry if we have less time to give than others do. We give out of our poverty just like the widow did. We give because God has given to us and we are grateful. We give because we have been created in the image of God, and because God gives, so do we. We give what we can uniquely give, not to earn praise and win respect but out of our love and trust for God. The widow gave all she had. Jesus gave all that he had, including his life.

¹ Emilie M. Townes, "Mark 12:38-44: Theological Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: WJKP, 2009), 286.

We all have something to give – our time, our talent, our treasure, our gifts, our joy, our love, our prayers, our service, our lives. We are disciples of Christ. If we follow him, then like him, we will give our all.

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Title:
Subject:
Author: Lauren McDonald
Keywords:
Comments:
Creation Date: 11/6/2009 8:28:00 PM
Change Number: 17
Last Saved On: 11/7/2009 10:07:00 PM
Last Saved By: Lauren McDonald
Total Editing Time: 191 Minutes
Last Printed On: 11/9/2009 9:50:00 AM
As of Last Complete Printing
Number of Pages: 5
Number of Words: 969 (approx.)
Number of Characters: 5,529 (approx.)