

How Much is Enough?

Mark 12:38-44

November 12, 2006

In my lectionary group last Monday one of the participants noted how nice it was that the developers of the Revised Common Lectionary chose to put this story of the widow's sacrificial giving during the fall when most churches are conducting stewardship campaigns. It certainly lends itself to that use; it calls us all to examine our patterns of giving. Ambrose Bierce wrote sarcastically that a "Christian is somebody who lives a life of virtue insofar as it is not incompatible with a life of pleasure" (Peter Gomes, *Strength for the Journey*, Harpers, 2003, p. 10) And so it is good to stop once in awhile to ask if we give out of our excess, from our surplus only after we've satisfied our life of pleasure, or do we give sacrificially, indeed, doing without, or being satisfied with less in order to give to God what is, after all, God's in the first place. In that kind of sermon most of us probably begin to squirm uncomfortably because – just look around at us – most of us are not hurting for anything. And indeed, if we were to look at our checkbook, a document that some have called the true diary of our priorities and of our faithfulness, we might have some explaining to do.

Although this passage does lend itself quite suitably to sermons on stewardship, perhaps stewardship was not all that Jesus had on his mind as he taught in the Temple and then sat down with his disciples near the treasury in the temple courtyard. It was, after all, Tuesday, only three days before his death. The day before, he had cast out the money changers from the temple, and called it a "den of robbers," a place where those in charge were systematically and with religious sanction, ripping off the poor instead of assisting them.

Here in the Temple courtyard, those in control think that they are at the center of things – after all, the scribes "walk around in long robes," and are "greeted with respect in the marketplaces," they "have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets." They get all of the attention. For everybody milling around in the Temple that day, these were the movers and shakers, the people who got things done, who had connections, who were going someplace in the world. And although they often reached success by unethical means, they somehow still thought that God was on their side. But Jesus reminds the disciples to beware of them, for although they have the outward appearance of righteousness "they devour widow's houses and will receive the greater condemnation."

Now, as a former English teacher, I know the importance of good transition, when we try to connect clearly one thought to another; repetition of a key word is way to make a clear transition. So, it's important that immediately after making this comment about the scribes and their unfair treatment of widows, Mark notes that Jesus, sitting near the treasury, sees "a poor widow," coming forth to make her contribution to the temple treasury. The verse reads "she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she has to live on." The literal translation of that last phrase, is significantly, "her whole life." She has contributed "her whole life." We already know that the leaders of the temple "devour widow's houses," and now along comes this poor woman, who places all that she has—her whole life-- in the keeping of those who have taken advantage of her. There is a story within a story here – at the heart, the devout widow who gives sacrificially and whose motives are pure, surrounded by a society and culture that manipulate and take advantage of the poor for selfish purposes.

In some ways this is a depressing story, a sad story, and I'm not sure that on one level the widow's gift is perhaps more appalling than appealing. We could all come up with stories of the exploitation of the weak and powerless. I remember the elderly woman I think I've told you about before who asked me whether or not she should send \$5 to a radio preacher in Gainesville. Now this woman lived on \$600 a month in social security, \$300 of which went for her medications; she was a breast cancer survivor—but the smooth-talking preacher had convinced her that his prayer would carry greater weight with God than her own and her \$5 donation would prove her faithfulness.

This past week there's been a lot of celebrating by Democrats that they've wrested power from the evil Republicans and all their ethical failures and abuses of power, but I've lived long enough now to know that it won't be long before the cycle will be repeated. It's not difficult to find examples of wickedness in our world. Power breeds corruption whether it's by individual radio or television evangelists or entire political parties. I guess we have to say that it is a given.

Within that disappointing context, Jesus often calls us to consider the kingdom of God – and the comparisons he gives are small ones – it is like a grain of mustard seed, or a single pearl buried in a field, or a bit of yeast mixed into a loaf of bread. So it is with the widow and her small gift of two coins – so small in fact that they probably made no sound at all when she dropped them into the collection box. Jesus invites us to consider the magnitude of her gift. For the world, a penny's worth, why bother? But Jesus knows that she gives all that she has, and thus her gift is greater than that of even the most powerful among those at the temple that day who were depositing large offerings into the collection boxes, and in her sacrificial giving the kingdom draws near.

This story makes me remember the gifts that were given when we renovated the kitchen a few years ago. It is true that we received some very large contributions for which we were very grateful, but it was the small gifts I remember most warmly– the \$5 or \$10 that came to us often with notes of appreciation for the ministry of Our Daily Bread, and sometimes the donors would also reminisce about the joy and satisfaction of what having given of themselves in other ways to Our Daily Bread had meant to them over the years. These were the sacrificial gifts from persons giving, not out of their abundance, but from the center of who they are.

Last week Jesus was asked “What is the greatest commandment,” and he answered, “to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength.” That was what Jesus had been trying to teach the disciples all along – loving God completely, giving ones entire self to God, means sacrifice, becoming last so that someone else can be first, serving instead of being served. Now instead of telling them, he's showing them. It's as if he's saying, “Look at her – that's what I mean; that's what I've been saying.” In dropping her two coins into the treasury, the widow became Jesus' words in action. She gave everything she had to live on – she gave “her whole life”

And a few days later Jesus would follow suit. In a corrupt and fallen world that little understood what it meant, and still doesn't, he gave everything he had – his whole life. Will Willimon says, “When it came time for Jesus to demonstrate how much he loved us, . . . he did not say, ‘I am willing to love the world, but only up to a point. How about, say 50 percent? Is that [enough]? No, he stretched out his arms and died. He gave all.” (Will Willimon, “Everything She Had,” *Pulpit Resource*, Oct, Nov, Dec, 2003, p. 27)

So what do you think we should do in response? How much is enough? In this rotten, corrupt, dog-eat-dog world, how much of what we have must we give to God and how much had we better stash away for ourselves? But, I'm not really talking about just our money here. I'm really talking about ourselves—all that makes us who we are—much more than our current bank balance. So, maybe we should rephrase that question. If we believe that it is in God that we live and move and have our being, and if we believe that it is from God that all that we have and value and that makes life worth living comes, maybe we should ask, “How much of all that God has given us, ought we keep for ourselves?” If we thought we were squirming before, when we thought this was a mere stewardship story, how much more are we squirming now. Because you see, that day in the temple, as Jesus watched the widow give all to the God who had given all, the answer was 100%.