

“REALLY? ALL THAT WE HAVE?”

A Sermon for the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost (Year B), November 8, 2009

Text: Mark 12:38-44

“ . . . but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all that she had to live on.”

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

All right, I confess. It is not 100% coincidence that on the day we ask members to return their pledge cards for the support of Bethlehem in 2010, we find ourselves reading from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 12, verses 38-44. I suspect that when we discussed possible target dates, I was slightly aware of what the readings were—that they dealt with giving.

But wait! How can this help? Jesus criticized the people who “put in large sums,” and praised the woman who put in “two small copper coins, which are worth a penny?”

Am I deliberately trying to undermine John Lewis and the Church Council? I’m sure our stewardship chairman and the council would not be happy if each of you took back your pledge card, wrote on it “two small copper coins each and every Sunday, for a total of \$1.04,” and handed it in.

Fortunately for Bethlehem, and fortunately for me, since I am a dependent of the congregation, that would be missing the point.

Perhaps I should support the stewardship campaign by advocating that everyone put in “everything they have, all that they have to live on?”

Fortunately for you, that would also be missing the point.

Jesus was not booing big gifts and cheering for little gifts. Nor was Jesus booing scribes and cheering for widows. Jesus was after something a little more subtle.

As usual, Jesus was raising the question of what life is all about, and giving an answer. In a sort of “real life parable.” A real life parable is when Jesus uses current events instead of making up a story; but the point is the same: to reveal some truth that it is easy to miss, when you are relying solely on your eyes. (Similar to the story of Martha in the Kitchen.)

Jesus was booing appearances. He was cheering the invisible reality of faith.

To bring into view the question of faith, which is invisible, Jesus used something visible. Something right there in front of people.

He could have put it this way:

“Say for example there are some rich people who put large gifts in the treasury, but what they give is only a fraction of what they have. When they give those large gifts, they are not jeopardizing their own welfare. They are enhancing it, because they receive the benefit of the appreciation of other people. And let’s say, for example, that someone who has very little puts in their last little bit of money, and I mean their last little bit of money. Nobody would, of course. That would be crazy. But let’s just pretend, for example, that this woman putting in

two copper coins, she's putting in the last bit of her savings and she doesn't have a family to depend on and she's not employed. Let's just say.

"Now, how shall we judge these people? Shall we say that those who do more for the welfare of the temple and of other people, are better people than she is? Or shall we call this crazy woman better than the others?"

And Jesus could have gone on to say: "Actually, pragmatically, for all intents and purposes, as far as we as humans can know, to the naked eye, the people who put in the greater amount are better, because in a roundabout way their gifts will actually provide for this widow when she runs out of food in a few hours. She will have to beg at the temple, and who will feed her? The temple staff, out of the money from the large gifts. So, humanly speaking, the better people are the large donors, both because to give and give generously is to act like the Lord, who "sustains the orphan and the widow."

Then Jesus would cut to his own point: "But what this analysis does not take into account is what is in the hearts of the donors. Doesn't that matter? Isn't that what God wants, that we should love and trust him? What can we guess about their hearts, from what we see? Who is loving and trusting in God more? People who can always count on the money they have left over after giving to the temple, or the person who *has nothing and no one left to rely on, and yet is still as generous as God?*"

Jesus could have made his conclusion even more obvious by saying, "It must be tempting for those who have lots of resources, *and* are admired by many other people, simply to trust in those two resources, and to live for them. As if they were enough. But I want you to learn to love and trust God *above* all things, not *in addition to* all things. It should be for everyone as if they were this woman who *believed* Psalm 146 verse 9: "The Lord sustains the orphan and widow." She believed that so firmly that she was thoughtless about tomorrow, what she would wear and what she would eat. She firmly believed that God would take care of her, and in the freedom that came from that faith, she was unaccountably, crazily generous. She is a case of 'blessed are the poor.'"

And for his newer disciples Jesus would probably have had to say: "Now, I'm not going to dictate what you should give to the temple. I dig generosity—remember the jar of pure nard that Mary poured on my feet? But the point is not the amount. The point is *whether you trust God and love each other*. It's all about faith and love. And you will not truly trust God or love each other, as long as you think, for example, that by much worrying you can add to the length of your life; or that the best thing you can do is fill your barns up and eat, drink, and be merry; or even if your life is lived according to a calculus of fairness."

In fact, Jesus probably did explain himself a lot more than we read in the Gospels. I think he averaged more than fifty words a day. Some researcher has figured out that men say about six thousand words a day, and women closer to nine thousand. I'm glad everything he said in three years wasn't written down, or each of the four Gospels would have been 24,000 pages long.

Still, with a few pungent words of criticism, Jesus laid bare the danger of thinking that we can avoid or bypass the issue of faith with long prayers or large gifts.

We can not and we need not imitate the hypothetical widow in Jesus' story and put in everything we have, all that we have to live on. But we can heed the warning and be reminded that our gifts to God are not grounded in ourselves, but are grounded in God's love for us. We do not give to God so that God will reciprocate. We give *because he has first given to us*. We give generously, we live generously, because we trust God. We give because we love God, and we want to be like him. We love, because he has first loved us.

And God's love for us has nowhere and never been so unequivocally revealed as in his giving us his own Son to us, who gave himself for us. Not halfway, but "everything he had to live on" — his very blood, his life, his breath. He gave it for us. That is a word from God, and we are reminded of it every time we take Communion. "My body, given for you. My blood, shed for you." The widow's sacrifice may have been hypothetical, but Jesus' sacrifice for us was not.

And his sacrifice for us was meant to recall us to a life in which we would continually respond to the grace of God with grace of our own, evidence of his Holy Spirit in us, as we in turn give ourselves, our moments and our days, our hands, our feet, our songs, ourselves for the care and redemption of all that God has made.

So, please don't put on your pledge card "everything that you have, all that you have to live on." (And please don't write 'two small copper coins'!) But today and all days, put "everything you have" into loving God and your neighbor, trusting God's love and mercy towards you. Amen

