

PENTECOST XXV, 2018

Mark 12.38-44

It was Pledge Sunday at the St. Somebody Lutheran Church. Members had been instructed to turn in their pledge cards with the offering. (Much like you are to do next Sunday.)

One gentleman, a wealthy, proud man, did not. Instead, he found the Pastor after the service and spoke to him personally. He gave the Pastor his pledge card and said with relish and pleasure, "Here's my 'widow's mite,' Pastor."

The Pastor looked at the man's pledge card. It was for \$12,000 - \$1,000 a month for the coming year. Then, to his church member's amazement, he gave it back to him.

"You've made a mistake," said the Pastor. "Your pledge is too small."

"What? Too small? What do you mean?" said the man, his voice showing both shock and anger.

"The widow's mite," said the pastor, "was all she had, her entire living."

I do not know if that story is true. I first heard it many years ago. But it is an example of how the Gospel reading for today is often viewed, a story about stewardship. The reading even conveniently is appointed for a Sunday in November, when most churches are doing their stewardship pledge campaigns. So, the story is often used, by example or guilt, to encourage people to make a good pledge. The appeal goes something like this: "Do you see how much the poor widow gave? Everything. Should not you, who have much more wealth, give much more? Can't you do that, for Jesus' sake?"

That is how this story is often used. And I confess, looking back on the sermons I have preached on this text, I have done the same. I often combined it with a story about a widow I knew in my first church. Her name was Nellie. She lived in public housing in West Philadelphia. Whenever I visited her to take her communion, she would give me a plastic bag filled with pennies she had saved from the change she received in making a purchase.

It was not much, but in terms of her wealth, it was a lot. And she gave it faithfully, every time I visited.

But I want to say, after reading and thinking a lot about this text, that it really is not about stewardship. For example, we do not know the motivation of the widow, why she gave all she did. We do not know how the widow felt about her offering. The text is silent about that. All we are told is, the woman was a widow, and she was poor.

Furthermore, Jesus does not use the situation to talk to his disciples about stewardship, about the use of wealth. (He does that elsewhere in the Gospels.)

So, if the text is not about stewardship, what is going on here? Why did the first followers of Jesus remember this incident? Why did Mark include this story in his Gospel? Let us listen to the story again anew, with fresh eyes and ears.

This story occurred during Holy Week. Jesus has been in the Temple all week, teaching the people and debating with the religious leaders. He concludes his teaching with a warning: "Beware of the scribes, who like to go about in long robes, and to have salutations in the market places and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." Notice especially that Jesus criticizes these people for "devouring widows' homes." That is, driving them into poverty.

Jesus sits down opposite the treasury. There was an offering box there, and as people came in and out of the temple they would deposit their offerings in it. The offerings helped operate the temple and aid the poor.

Jesus watches the people put money into the offering box. The rich people put their offerings in, often by making a big show of their offering (like the man in the story I told). Then along comes a widow. She is poor, we are told. Slowly she makes her way along the wall. Reaching the offering box, she puts in two small coins, each less than a penny.

Jesus watches this, and then He points this out to the disciples. "Look at that," He says. The rich

gave out of their abundance, their leftover money. But she gave everything, all she had, even if it did not amount to much. Her small gift was bigger than all the larger gifts combined.

And that's it. We are not told anything more. So, what's the point of this scripture. What is God trying to say to us through it?"

First, note that Jesus "sees" the widow. In fact, He is the only person, we are told, who *sees* this woman. To everyone else, she was invisible. They just did not see her. Or, they looked the other way. They did not want to be bothered with her.

That is a common human trait. We look away from suffering. We prefer beauty and strength. A man I know told me about his daughter when she was three. She was super-cute. When she sat in the shopping cart in the grocery store, people would see her and lavish praise all over her for how she looked. But one day she took a fall in her living room. Her mouth hit the edge of a coffee table, splitting her lip and knocking out a tooth.

All of a sudden, she was not so cute anymore. People stopped making a fuss over her when she was out in public. If they saw her in the check-out line, they would make a glance, then turn their eyes away very quickly.

Jesus saw the widow. He did not ignore her or her poor condition. That echoes a theme in Mark's Gospel. Jesus is always noticing the little people. He noticed and cared for lepers, the blind, foreigners, the Syro-phoenician woman, eating with outsiders and outcasts. He ate with them, which meant Jesus saw them as sharers in the Kingdom of God. He used children, who were very low on the social totem-pole, as example of faith and greatness in His kingdom.

Now you know, that is not the normal human focus. We live in a celebrity culture. We look to and emulate the lives of the rich and famous, the star athlete, those with money and power. But Jesus sees and notices the widow. The Gospel Jesus proclaims is not just for the wealthy and well-off. It is good news for those who are not noticed, ignored, on the fringe of society.

We should ask: Who are the people we do not see? Whom do you ignore, or pass by, or look away from, because their condition or situation is unpleasant? What are the opportunities you encounter, this church encounters, where you can be the arms of Christ, reaching out in love to those in need?

Then there is Jesus' comment: "For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living."

Again, this is not a lesson in stewardship. Jesus is not praising her for her action. Instead, Jesus' words are a lament, a judgment against the kind of society that would let a woman come to this condition of poverty. It was no fun being a widow in Jesus' time, especially if you did not have sons. Your life was reduced to begging in the streets or the "oldest profession," as it is said.

So, Jesus, it seems, is saying, "What kind of society is it, that would let a poor widow suffer this way? What kind of religion is this, that demands so much of people that it strips them of their livelihood and dignity? We are supposed to be the covenant people of God. In His Law God specifically commands His people to care for the widow and the orphan. So why is this woman forced to live like this? Something needs to change."

What would you say, if we applied the same questions, the same thinking, to the problems and situations we find in our culture? What needs to change, and how can a church, this church, in its ministry to the community, be the kind of people God calls His Church to be and do?

The last thing we should note are Jesus' words: "She gave everything she had, her whole life." These words close Jesus' public ministry. Ahead lies the cross. So, the woman's gift becomes a foreshadowing of Jesus' death. Jesus is the one who gives His whole life, for us and our salvation, so that we can be free to offer our lives as a living sacrifice to God and others. Amen.