

THINK SMALL (BUT ALSO BIG)!

(11/21/2021)

Scripture Lesson: Mark 12:38-44; 13:1-2

“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.” (Mark 12:43-44)

Darlene and I love the route we take on our ride to church on Sunday mornings, especially on days like today—a beautiful, slightly overcast, slightly melancholy fall day. The lake, which lies immediately to our right on Route 85 in Hopkinton, is so quiet and peaceful, with still waters reflecting the trees that both ring it and appear in its depths, gracing the still waters with touches of rust and yellow to augment the green of white pines. I like the little island out in the middle of the lake, a little oasis; people draw up their canoes or paddleboats on its beach to just hang around for a spell on warm summer days.

But the days are no longer warm summer days. The lake in early morning is no longer abustle with people recreating in sailboats and canoes. It is often empty, its mirror surface undisturbed by human voyagers. I, somewhat playfully, describe the weather on early fall mornings as “brisk and invigorating,” but I know that this is a euphemism; it is simply cold! In another couple of months, the frozen surface of the lake may be dotted with people engrossed in the solitary enterprise of ice fishing, sitting quietly in little chairs around a hole that they chopped or drilled in the ice, hoping something edible from the depths will take to their bait.

This morning, as Darlene and I drove past the lake, we saw a person paddling one of those single-person little boats, I think you call them kayaks, out near the island. This man or woman was the sole person on the lake this morning. Watching this solitary kayaker slowly, gracefully move across the still surface of the water brought to mind the story, perhaps it is even a legend, of a little Eskimo or Inuit boy named Nanuk.

Nanuk used to paddle his little kayak off the coast of Alaska up by the Bering Straits. During the winter, the weather was more than brisk and invigorating; it was downright cold! One day, Nanuk got an idea. He lit a fire in the back of the kayak so he could keep warm while he was out in the water. However, Nanuk hadn’t thought this through all the way. The fire, not surprisingly, soon burned a hole through the hull of the wooden kayak and Nanuk found himself in the freezing water swimming for his life.

And the moral of that story is?

You can’t have your kayak and heat it too. (Get it?)

I don’t know why I told you this story. Perhaps I just wanted to lighten things up a little! With so much heaviness, with so much darkness in the world, I would be happy if, for even a brief moment, I just made you smile. Then again, with these dumb masks I can’t tell if you’re

smiling! However, from the rolling of your eyes or your low moans while holding your head in your hands and rocking, I suspect that you at least got the pun!

At first glance, the story of Nanuk not thinking things all the way through would seem to have little relevance for a sermon on either stewardship or Thanksgiving. Then again, perhaps it does! Perhaps, in keeping with our stewardship theme, we need to think things all the way through more often than we do—like the ramifications of not pledging to our church! After all, we would like to have our church and heat it, too! The only way we can do this is if your pledges enable us to pay the oil bill! If you are sitting comfortably here this morning in a nice warm sanctuary, which provides us all with ample reason to be thankful, think about what makes this such a nice place to worship!

There. At least I've done my part by speaking to the importance of Christian stewardship on Stewardship Sunday.

Now let's go back to today's scripture lesson: the story of the widow's offering. Jesus and his disciples have entered Jerusalem, the capital city of the nation of Israel. The disciples are impressed by the buildings and by the important people in the temple. The disciples are humble fishermen. This may have been their first trip to the big city.

That the disciples are impressed by the size and opulence of the temple is hardly surprising, for the temple in Jerusalem was truly one of the wonders of the ancient world. It had been rebuilt and restored to its former glory by King Herod. Herod was a cruel king who persecuted the followers of Jesus, but, to his credit, he was a master builder.

The disciples are impressed by the size of the stones, and well they should be, for the stones were 37^{1/2} feet long, 18 feet wide, and 12 feet thick. However, Jesus is not impressed. He predicts the immanent destruction of the temple. His prediction comes to pass literally in 70 C.E. when the temple was torn down by the Romans as they crushed the Israelite rebellion. It comes to pass symbolically as Jesus becomes the "new temple" for the Word of God following his death and resurrection. It can also come to pass in us when we realize that the church is more than a building or an institution, when we realize that we, like Jesus, are living temples for the Word of God, for the Holy Spirit.

The disciples, some of whom are probably illiterate, are impressed by the literacy of the scribes. Jesus is not impressed. He uses that which draws the disciples' attention, that which impresses them to make a point. He heaps scorn on the scribes. He rejects their teaching as legalistic and inadequate, and he describes their practice of religion as hypocritical. From Jesus they receive not praise but condemnation.

Jesus tells his disciples that the scribes are more concerned with outer appearance than inner character. They are preoccupied with what C. G. Jung called the persona, the image we seek to project to the outside world. Preoccupation with our persona, with image, status, and

rank invariably signals a lack of spiritual depth or results in a lack of spiritual depth. As we know, those who lack spiritual depth invariably lack the ability to love. And those who lack the ability to love invariably lack the desire to give.

Jesus makes an example of the scribes to teach his disciples a lesson. He warns his disciples not to take the scribes as a model for their own spirituality. Jesus contrasts the scribes with the widow, whom he holds up as an example for the disciples to follow.

Mark describes the woman as a poor widow. As a point of fact, all widows in Jesus' day were poor. A widow was only a step above a slave. She would be among those whom the disciples would not notice, whom they would not want to notice.

In the temple, the disciples naturally notice the biggest givers. We do the same. As a general rule, in a capital or a stewardship campaign the top twelve families in a church who have the means and the commitment to give usually account for 75% of the total amount pledged. This guideline is ironically true of our church since we only have eleven families who pledge their weekly support of the operating expenses of our church. However, these eleven families pledge an amazing average of \$30.00 a week! When we consider our demographic, that most of our members are on fixed income, I think many of our members are more like the widow than the rich donors; they give more than one has any reason to expect!

As people put their offerings into the donation chests, the disciples would naturally notice those who gave the most.

Each donation chest in the temple court was labeled according to the charitable purpose for which the funds would be used. The offering was voluntary, as contrasted with the temple tax, which was mandatory. The donation chests were like the monthly mission envelopes that we include in our own offering.

The donation chest was shaped like an inverted trumpet. Since it was made of metal, one could hear and discern the relative number, size, and, hence, the value of the coins that were dropped into it. In this church, we are much more sensitive. Our Sunday morning offering plates have a layer of felt on the bottom to cushion the sound of coins, and we provide offering envelopes so no one except the collector will know how much you give.

Jesus directs his disciples' gaze toward the widow. He tells them to watch and listen. Despite the turmoil and commotion of the temple courtyard, Jesus hears the offering that the woman places in the chest. How could Jesus hear this? Jesus' ears must have been attuned to the faintest sound if he heard two small coins dropping into the donation chest. Perhaps this attention to the smallest detail is a reminder that nothing escapes the notice of God "from whom no secrets are hid."

The woman places two small copper coins in the temple treasury. The copper coin, a lepton, was roughly equivalent to a penny. The lepton was the smallest Greek coin in circulation. The woman's offering was thus of little monetary value.

Jesus is impressed not by the big but by the small. Jesus tells his disciples that the gift is judged based on what it means to the giver. The inclination of the heart, the motivation behind the gift is of great spiritual significance and value. This is the reason why the widow is worthy of such respect. She gives everything she has. She literally gives away her next meal. Her giving is an expression of gratitude, an expression of trust. She is sharing with those who have even less than she does.

In the sight of people, the widow's gift is worth little. In the eyes of God, who looks on the heart, her gift is immense! Jesus tells us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. The widow has fulfilled this commandment. She holds back nothing. She is a reminder that no gift of love is too small, and that the smallest of gifts, if given in the right spirit, is great in the eyes of God.

Our offering, our pledge to the church has spiritual significance. It is an act of worship. To be sure, stewardship is a responsibility that comes with being a member of a church, but it is a responsibility that we should carry with joy! We should not want to be excused from the grace that comes with giving. Even as Jesus knows both the amount of the woman's offering and the spirit that gives rise to it, he knows what we give and what we withhold from the church; what we give and what we withhold from those we love; what we give and what we withhold from life.

The story of the widow's gift reminds me of something that happened in our church several years ago, at the time of our last yard sale. The yard sale was successful in many ways. Our church members experienced the fellowship that comes when people work together toward a common goal. We were blessed by the generosity of many of our friends who gave us stuff to sell and then came to our yard sale to buy other stuff. The event was well attended, and we did well financially, helping to shrink our budget deficit.

However, the most beautiful thing that happened at this yard sale was none of the above.

Near the end of the day, a little girl who came to our yard sale with her family approached Karin Farmer at the Women's Fellowship bake table. When she handed Karin \$1.50, Karin asked if she wanted some cookies. The little girl said, "No." Karin then asked if she wanted to pay for something from a different table. The girl said she didn't want to buy anything. When Karin looked perplexed, the little girl explained that she just wanted to give a donation to our church because we are a little church, and she didn't want our little church to close. She told Karin her grandmother attends a little church that is closing because they don't have money, and she doesn't want that to happen to this church. All she had was \$1.50, but she wanted us to have it.

I'm sure that Karin remembers this encounter. Neither Karin nor I know who this little girl was. She has no connection with our church, but she apparently knows quite a bit about us. We are indeed a little church; we don't have a lot of money; and if the time comes when our members and friends no longer support us with their gifts of time, talent, and treasure, we will close. Then something very special will be lost.

What makes this little girl's gift so special is that we have probably never done anything for her or for her family. Like the widow, she only wanted to give. Perhaps, like an angel, she had come to teach us something. She may have come to teach us the spiritual importance of small gifts. If this is the case, she was a true lesson in stewardship.

The little girl had only \$1.50, but she shared everything she had. She held nothing back for herself. In her act of giving, she was like the widow that Jesus and his disciples observed. Her act of giving was a spiritual grace, a spiritual grace to her and a lesson in giving to us.

Her act also gives rise to a sobering thought. Wouldn't it be sad if this little girl gave more to our church than many of our members or friends contributed over the entire past year?

The widow placed only two small coins in the offering plate. The little girl gave us only \$1.50. If we share in the same spirit as these two givers, we will know the true spirit of Thanksgiving; we will know the true meaning of Christian stewardship; and as individuals and as a church we will be rich beyond our wildest dreams.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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