

## THE WIDOW'S COINS

(11/10/2024)

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)

The scripture lesson today is the story of the widow's coins, the widow's offering, or the widow's mite, as the Greek word is translated in the King James Version. It is an appropriate theme for our reflection as we approach Stewardship Sunday, which in our church coincides with Thanksgiving Sunday.

Jesus and his disciples have just entered Jerusalem, the capital city, the seat of national power, the symbol of the nation of Israel. The disciples are impressed by the buildings and by the important people they see in the temple. Remember, the disciples are humble fishermen, working men from the outlying villages, little more than country bumpkins.

The disciples must have felt like Darlene, Kristen and I felt twenty-five years ago when we took a six-week drive around the country. When we were in southern California, of course we had to window shop on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. I had the feeling that everyone we saw *actually shopping* in the Rodeo Drive stores, *actually buying something*, must be a celebrity or at least an important person. I definitely didn't belong there! I felt much more comfortable in the Arizona canyons and the New Mexico desert. Actually, now that I come to think about it, Darlene and Kristen said they *definitely* belonged there! That's still scary!

That the disciples are impressed by the temple in Jerusalem is not surprising, for it was truly one of the wonders of the ancient world. It was restored by Herod, a great builder but a cruel king who persecuted the followers of Jesus. The stones to which the disciples refer were impressive. They were 37 1/2 feet long, 18 feet wide, and 12 feet thick.

The disciples are impressed by the size of the stones. Jesus is not impressed. He prophesies or predicts the immanent destruction of the temple. This happens a few years later in 70 A.D. It also happens symbolically as Jesus becomes the new temple for the Word of God, as we become the new temple, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.

A Tibetan Buddhist lama was once asked the following question: “If a Tibetan nomad, a yak herder who had spent his entire life on the Tibetan plateau, were suddenly transported into downtown New York City, what would his reaction be? The lama responded, “The man would obviously be impressed by the size of the buildings, the skyscrapers, *but he would not be unduly impressed*. He would not be unduly impressed, for he would know that one day these magnificent buildings, just like him, will all be dust.

I think the lama's response is a lesson in the awareness and the deep acceptance of impermanence. It is a lesson in what is really important in life, what is truly lasting, and it challenges us to think about what survives the death, the dissolution of the body, this transient form. It also reminds us that there is a difference between being impressed and being *unduly* impressed.

The disciples are unduly impressed by the scribes, by their literacy, by how much they know. Jesus is not impressed. Jesus uses that which draws the disciples' attention to make a point. He heaps scorn on the scribes. He rejects their teaching as legalistic and inadequate, their practice of religion as hypocritical. For this they receive his condemnation.

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. It also signals a lack of consciousness of our shadow, those parts of us we repress to strengthen our persona, those parts of ourselves that become conscious in a destructive way when we project them onto other individuals or groups of people. Those who lack spiritual depth invariably lack the ability to love. They also lack the desire to give.

Jesus uses the scribes to teach his disciples a lesson. He warns his disciples not to take the scribes as a model for spirituality, as models for their own spiritual journeys. Jesus contrasts the scribes with the widow, whom he presents as an example for the disciples to follow.

Mark describes the woman as a poor widow. This is a tautology. All widows in Jesus' day were poor and vulnerable. A widow was only a step above a slave. She would be among those whom the disciples would not notice; she would be among those whom the disciples would not want to notice.

The disciples would naturally notice the biggest givers to the church, to the temple fund. We do the same. In a capital campaign for a church, 75% is usually given by a dozen people. In an average-size church, the top twelve families who have both the means and the commitment to give usually account for 75% of the amount pledged. As people put their offerings into the donation chests, the disciples would naturally notice those who gave the most.

There were thirteen donation chests in the temple court. Each was labeled according to the purpose for which it would be used. The offering was voluntary, not like the temple tax, which was required of all Jews. The offering was like a church poor box, like our own offering plates, or like the envelopes that we use for our contribution to the Building Fund, to the Deacons' Fund, or to missions.

The donation chest was apparently shaped like an inverted trumpet, probably as a protection against theft. Since it was made of metal, one could hear and discern the relative number and value of the coins that were deposited. They didn't use paper money, checks, or even Venmo in Jesus' time. We are much more sensitive. Our 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 and the treasurer know how much you give.

Jesus directs his disciples' gaze toward the widow. He tells them to watch and listen. What a beautiful directive! Watching and listening are two central parts of spirituality, two central parts of any spiritual discipline. We need to watch and listen to others. We also need to watch and listen to ourselves. Watching and listening connect us with life in the present.

Jesus watches and listens. Despite the commotion of the temple court, 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 noise of all if he heard the falling of two small coins. Perhaps it 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," is roughly equivalent to a penny. There were 128 lepta in a denarius, the average daily wage for working people. The lepton was the smallest Greek coin in circulation. The woman's offering was thus of little monetary value, but, according to Jesus, it was of great spiritual significance.

Jesus is impressed not by the big but by the small. We stress percentages in our stewardship campaign. We encourage you to tithe, to give 10% of your annual income to the church. There are probably few churches where if all the members gave a half tithe or even a quarter tithe, their pledged income would not double. Percentages are important as guidelines, but note that Jesus does not talk percentages.

Jesus tells his disciples that the gift is judged on the basis of what it means to the giver. The heart, the motivation behind the gift is of great spiritual significance and value. This is why the widow is such a powerful example. She gives everything she has. She literally gives away her next meal. This is a tremendous act of trust!

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, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our 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 a gift of love can never be too large.

Our gift to the church and to the world through the church has spiritual significance. It is an act of worship. Stewardship is a duty, a responsibility to our church and to the world, but it is a responsibility we should carry with joy. No one should seek to be excused from the grace and duty of giving. Even as Jesus knows both the amount of the woman's offering and the spirit which gives rise to her offering, he knows what we give and what we withhold, not only from the church, but also from those we love; what we give and what we withhold from life.

This past week, when I read today's scripture, I was reminded of an incident that happened in this church a long time ago, probably twenty years ago, not long after I first came to this church. I believe it illustrates the lesson of the widow's two copper coins.

The coffee hour was over or almost over. Darlene, who, as you know, is the master of the twenty-minute goodbye, the people who hosted the coffee hour, one or two parishioners and I were tidying up the kitchen and the vestry, when we became aware that someone was standing outside the kitchen door. When I went outside to check, I encountered a woman dressed in a sari who was obviously Indian. She spoke little English. When I reached into my limited store of Hindi words to greet her with "Namaste," she lit up like a Christmas tree.

From her gestures I realized she wanted to see our church. I tried to tell her our worship service had ended, but I doubt if she understood what I was saying. I invited her inside the church and led her up the stairs to see our sanctuary. As we stood in the narthex, the woman looked toward me, pointed first at herself and then at the sanctuary, asking if she were allowed to enter. When I responded by saying "Ha," which means "yes," she seemed pleased. She took off her sandals and left them by the door to the sanctuary.

I thought, "This woman, who is probably Sikh or Hindu, has such respect for our Christian sanctuary, she enters it in an attitude of reverence. She treats it as a sacred space. For a moment I wondered if I am too casual about entering the sacred space of our sanctuary, whether we are too casual, and whether we lose something in the process. I took off my shoes and walked into the sanctuary with the woman.

The woman walked to the front of the church and stopped at the foot of the chancel. She pointed at the altar and looked at me quizzically. When I indicated she could approach, she folded her hands together, bowed deeply, and walked up the steps to stand before the altar. I bowed and followed her up the stairs. As I did, I wondered if I am too casual about entering the sacred space of the chancel every Sunday morning, whether we are too casual, and whether we lose something in the process.

I realized the woman was holding something in her hand. She walked forward, placed two crumpled one-dollar bills in the collection plate, bowed, and backed down the stairs, never taking her eyes from the cross. I was reminded of a Zen retreat I attended many years ago where we were taught that whether we were entering or leaving the zendo, we should never turn our back on the altar. To do so is a sign of disrespect. The woman and I walked out of the sanctuary and put on our shoes. She smiled and bowed to me. I bowed and said, “Shukria,” which means “thank you.” Then she left.

Who was this woman? What was she doing in our church? Was she making an offering for the health of a sick child, as I have seen so many Hindu and Buddhist women do in India, Nepal, and Tibet? Did she know anything about Christianity? Did she know anything about Jesus? Was I helpful to her? Was it comforting for her to be in the sanctuary of our church?

Or was she there to teach me something, to teach us something—like an angel? Was she there to remind us to have respect for the religious beliefs and practices of others, to respect a sacred space no matter what the religious tradition? Was she there to remind us not to enter a sanctuary empty handed? Was she a lesson in stewardship?

I wondered if, as in the story of the widow’s coins, this was all the money she had. I’m not sure what she received from her encounter with our church, but she obviously felt she needed to give. There was such joy on her face when she placed her small gift on the altar. I felt both humbled and shamed when I thought of how I feel or how little I feel when I write out a check for our weekly pledge.

I still think about this woman and our strange encounter that Sunday afternoon. She never returned to our church. I wonder whether our worship service would touch her, or whether she had already received from our little church what she needed. Was she there to receive, or was she there to give--or perhaps both? Was it through giving that she received? Was she there to teach us a lesson, a lesson about stewardship?

If so, do we understand the message?

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
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An audio version of this sermon will (hopefully) be posted on our church website later this week.