

“Watch”  
Sermon by Rev. Peter Shidemantle  
Commitment Sunday  
November 11, 2018  
Mark 12:38-44

Honest, I didn't pick today's gospel lesson from Mark about the poor widow who gives everything she has to be read today because it is our stewardship commitment Sunday! It really was the assigned passage for today in the revised common lectionary, which we follow, for the most part, in our worship here at Pebble Hill. And although the “stewardship season” comes around regularly and predictably in the fall of the year in most churches, it doesn't warrant its own liturgical emphasis like Advent or Lent do. Still, Jesus, and the entire Bible for that matter, say a lot more about money than Jesus and the rest of the Bible say about practically any other issue when it comes to serving God and following Jesus. So, I thought I'd go with the obvious this morning and stay with the assigned text.

Until I broke away from the lectionary for my sermon series on “Abundance” these last three Sundays, we'd been working our way through Mark's gospel for some months, and by the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter we're getting pretty close to the end. In a few weeks, once Advent comes, we'll be moving into Luke. Luke tends to smooth out the rough edges in his gospel; in Mark everything is ragged and relentless. Jesus keeps thrusting himself into the world, from the beginning. There is no birth story in Mark, nothing about his family. He just shows up as if from nowhere. A prominent word used in Mark is “immediately.” “Immediately” Jesus did this or that, went here or there. And now, near the end, it's all moving at a gallop. Our reading is set between Jesus slamming the scribes for their ostentatious showings of piety, while they take advantage of the poor and the widows – and the overpowering glory of Herod's Temple: “Look, teacher, what large stones and buildings!” Jesus isn't impressed, not by the long robes of the scribes and their penchant for public attention, and not the glory of the temple. No, it's the poor widow who moves him, her extravagance – a prelude to his own extravagance in laying down his life.

Money gives us freedom and independence so we don't have to live like the poor widow depicted in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark. We want it that way and we like it that way – as do our families. We aspire to have this kind of freedom and independence because we do not want to be dependent on others – we want to make our own way in the world. Surely the poor widow did not aspire to poverty. As Barbara Brown Taylor says of her: “She didn't dream of growing up poor, just so she could be memorialized for all time in the scriptures as one whom Jesus invited his disciples to watch as she deposited her last two coins into the temple treasury.” She has

been romanticized and sentimentalized, made into a kind of stewardship icon – and in that way put out of reach of most of us mere mortals – and thus easily dismissed.

But Jesus didn't romanticize or sentimentalize her poverty, nor anyone else's. In fact, he had just unleashed a scathing attack on the practice of some of the clergy of the day taking advantage of women like this – a practice that we know some so-called religious leaders are guilty of even today. She wasn't just a "poor widow." She was poor because she was a widow. There was no such thing as a rich widow in that culture at that time. To be widowed didn't just mean that you lost someone you may have loved, but also that you were losing the one on whom you were totally dependent. Widows were forced to live off the good graces of other male relatives and anyone who might provide a meal here, a little money there.

So what is it about her, about her offering, that Jesus wants us to "watch?" The first thing to be said is that she should be seen at all! Jesus had to call the disciples' attention to her – otherwise they wouldn't even have noticed her. Like them, we tend to watch the main act, follow the important action. But Jesus watches the margins; he notices what and whom others ignore – the ones the rest of us see in our peripheral vision, if we see at all. The widow certainly stands there on the margins, on the margins of the society of her day, and on the margins really of all we hold dear: our freedom and independence, yes, our financial security, the things that tend to get us noticed by others. We've worked for these things, and in that sense we deserve them. But Jesus wants us to watch her because in some essential way she is a spiritual mentor to us. It has to do with her freedom, even though she is so dependent. Those two coins weren't going to buy much; they weren't going to change her life. People who are poor know that when you've got so little, a buck or two isn't going to move you from welfare to work. She could be joyful and at peace in knowing that she was able to give. She was a dependent person before she gave the coins, and that didn't change once she let them go. It wasn't money or status she was dependent upon; she had neither. She didn't even have bootstraps to pull herself up by. She was dependent upon God and her neighbors for everything. And with that comes a realization and a reliance on the grace of God. Jacques Ellul has written that "(Giving) is a sacrament of grace, a physical witness to the reality of God's grace in giving and to the work of grace in our hearts . . . (Giving) must always be done with freedom and joy . . . If in your giving you feel no freedom, no joy, don't give. You're giving for the wrong reasons."

That's why Jesus wants us to watch – that this is how we all are before God, with nothing but God's grace to ultimately sustain us. We have no resources apart from the riches of God's mercy. This changes our relationship to all that we consider "ours," and it helps us to understand how it is true that what the woman gave, as small as it was, far outweighed the much more that others gave from their abundance. Jesus doesn't judge the large gifts

negatively, and he doesn't romanticize the much smaller offering of the widow. No, the point of the comparison is not what is given, but what one has remaining for oneself. It is, in other words, all about how complete is one's trust in God.

You see, truly generous living can't be determined by what's left over after we've taken our "cut" on life. It's determined by who holds our trust. Do we entrust our lives to God, or to someone, something else? And how does my life reflect it? Does God get the first cut, the "first fruits" of our labors, our devotion? The disciples of Jesus, you'll remember, had been very interested to this point in Mark's gospel in "greatness." Jesus says to keep their eyes on the widow. She's the one to watch.

Someone asked me recently what it costs to be a member of the church? Well, it costs nothing, and it costs everything. As to the particular amount, that's for each of us to discern, but in our discernment we'll arrive at a figure that represents where we are along the continuum between the personal freedom and independence that we've been taught to value so highly, and our dependence on God alone. Our culture counsels us to become like the honored scribes, but Jesus counsels us to become like the dishonored widow, and to model our lives on one we would normally overlook.

When our kids were younger, back in the days when they had these places called video stores where you went to rent video tapes and later DVD's and bring them home to watch them – it was usually me, at the family's behest, who would go to pick up their desired rental. Often times I/we would forget to take it back in time, as it would sit around under a magazine or down behind the TV – and we would owe much more than the rental price. That always really bugged me, and I would say to our kids that we might as well just drive down the street and throw money out the window. But there is a sense in which our giving to the work of God through the church is to be like that. We are used to paying for services rendered or products obtained, and often we wonder if that service or product is worth the price we've paid. It's the "bottom line" that concerns us – that bottom line of value to us, or the satisfaction that we realize. But our giving to God's work in the church and the world is to proceed in a different fashion, a different movement. It is about becoming freed and freed up from the connection to what is "mine," about a heart that is coming to know the joy of dependence on God alone, a joy that leads to great thanksgiving.

It is true, I think, that the less you have, the easier it is to let go of it. I've shared my stewardship story from my freshman year in college before (one more time!). I went to church one Sunday with my friend. When the offering was announced I rooted around in my pockets and I realized I didn't have any money with me. Just as the offering plate was about to reach us I asked my

friend for a quarter, which he gave me – and it barely grazed my palm as I sort of nudged it into the plate. We both laughed, and so did the lady next to us. I've often thought since that this is the proper order of our stewardship. As we realize more and more that all we have, that life itself, is a gift of God, then our hold on life is released as we nudge the gift along.

In this sense our giving ought not to be so much the result of careful deliberation of what we can "afford," as it is a prayerful response to the brush of God on our lives. It ought to be less deliberative and more spontaneous – more freely given, if not so much with a laugh as with a quiet joy. Yet it should also be intentional, which is why we are asked to make a "pledge." Discipline is an essential part of discipleship, as they come from the same word – a reminder to keep ourselves on the path of grace.

Certainly things get more complicated when we are dealing with more than quarters, let alone pennies – and when we're dealing with more than ourselves, for we all have important responsibilities in life – but the same order applies. As the psalmist writes, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it." Life is a gift – and all that is, including all that we have rightfully earned, comes ultimately from the hands of God. We are the work of those hands. We live and die, work and rest in those hands. I don't want to be free of those hands. I want to know my freedom in being held by God, for in those hands is life abundant.