

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
Mark 12: 41-44
“Everything”
24th Sunday after Pentecost
November 8, 2015

Today’s Scripture lesson is the story that is popularly known as “The Widow’s Mite.” To get to this point in the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus has encountered a lot of people on the road to Jerusalem. He has met a rich man who knew the commandments in his head but who said “no” to Jesus with tears in his eyes because his money and possessions had become monkeys on his back that he just couldn’t shake off. Jesus has been joined on the road to Jerusalem by a man named Bartimaeus, who after Jesus had resurrected him from his living death of blindness and in contrast to the rich man, tossed aside the cloak of his identity and livelihood and thus lightened of his burden claimed the freedom that Jesus gave him and joined onto Jesus’s kingdom movement as a disciple.

With Bartimaeus by his side, Jesus entered Jerusalem on the back of a donkey and came to the Temple, in-your-face contrast to the great emperor’s entering a conquered city on a mighty horse.

Once he was there, some detractors showed him a Roman coin. He told them that while life’s realities may demand that they give partial allegiance to the government, they were to devote the whole of their lives, body, soul, mind, and strength, to God. And in response to a scribe who told him that loving God and neighbor is more important than outward religious practice, he said, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

As today’s Scripture lesson opens, Jesus is sitting opposite the area of the Temple where offerings were placed into twelve large chests which were shaped like trumpets.

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The story of the widow’s mite is probably the #1 go-to text for Christian stewardship sermons. What preacher, including this one, hasn’t on more than one occasion expounded upon how the widow slipped quietly into the Temple and humbly plinked her two coins into the offering plate, tethering her example to the question, “If a poor widow can sacrifice *that* much, how much more are we—most of us wealthy in comparison to the widow—called by God to pledge in financial support to the church?”

This is one way to read the text.

However, one thing I have learned this week is that when Stewardship Sunday is past history on the Sunday that this text circles around on the carousel that is the three year lectionary cycle, it can free us all up to see that there is a lot more to the text than may be apparent at first.

We begin to see this when we look at the larger Markan context of Jesus’s observation of the woman’s offering.

Mark has prefaced the story of the widow with an account of Jesus blasting the religious leaders of his day for their greed, their pomposity, their crass exploitation of the poor. “Beware of the scribes,” Jesus has told his followers, “They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.” Their piety, in other words, is a sham, and the religious institution they lead is corrupt. Jesus has ripped off the scab that was covering over.

Indeed, in the days leading up to the widow’s gift, Jesus has been picking at the scab, offering one scathing critique after another of the economic and political exploitation that existed all around. He has made a mockery of Roman pomp and circumstance when he made his entry into Jerusalem riding on a donkey’s back. He has pulled the rug out from under the tables of the Temple’s moneychangers. (1)

Now one of the things that is interesting about the Bible is that it only rarely gives any hints to the acoustics of a text. What I mean by this is that there are not many verses in the Bible that say something like, “Jesus replied cheerfully” or Peter said angrily.” There are not many adverbs in the Bible to suggest

the tone with which a speaker says something. Verbs too tend toward words like “answered” or “said” or “spoke.” Rarely do we read more descriptive verbs like “whispered” or “shouted.”

When stewardship sermons promote the widow’s response as something to be emulated, the tone in which we imagine Jesus speaking conveys a sense of appreciation, a sense of wonder.

And maybe, this tone is present in the text.

But I have come to believe that if we take the larger context to heart, the actual tone that Jesus used was one of scorn, sarcasm, and lament. In the light of the criticism that he has been leveling at the religious and the political establishment of the day, it may well be more accurate to hear his words in this way, “This religious establishment is taking advantage of this woman, this *poor* woman, this woman who lives on the margins of society, this woman who has no safety net, no husband to advocate for her, no pension to draw upon, no social status to hid behind, this woman who is vulnerable in every way that matters. (2) Look at her. She is putting everything she has, every last penny to live on to support this corrupt manifestation of God.” (3)

Indeed, one commentator suggests that when the woman put her two coins into the Temple treasury, she was signing her own death certificate in effect. Consider how Jesus puts it, “She out of her poverty has put in everything that she had, all that she had to live on.” Having no money for food or shelter or medicine, she would likely have died mere days after Jesus observed her making her offering at the Temple. (4)

And so, might it be true that when Jesus looks at the woman and how she is willing to die for the sake of her religion, it clarifies for him what he himself must do which is to give away his life?

When Jesus looks at the widow giving away her life, he sees in her what he himself must do.

But here is where the stark contrast comes in: whereas the woman gives away her everything for the sake of a corrupt religious establishment, Jesus gives away his everything in order to transform that religious establishment, to make the church his very body, a body which is willing to give up its institutional status and well-being for the sake of those who live on the margin.

Jesus dies to himself in order that we as the church might die to ourselves and our selfish wants and needs and be resurrected into his living body, alive and active and faithful here on earth, not for the sake of our own survival, but for the sake of a world that is yearning to breathe in God’s light and air and freedom.

Davidson College Presbyterian Church got a glimpse of what it looks like and feels like to be transformed in such a way at yesterday’s Day of Service. The weather outside was frightful. Yes, it was. But inside, there was a feeling of joy and anticipation as we worshiped and prayed for the agencies which work on behalf of people, many of whom can be compared to the widow in Mark’s story, that is, people who have been bumped around in one way or another by the powers and principalities which have made our communities, our nation, the world into their own personal boxing ring.

And then we went our separate ways. I went to Blythe Elementary School, and I got to sit at a table for a couple of hours tearing out workbook pages and reassembling them so that a teacher there can spend more time teaching and less time on this mindless, time-consuming, but necessary task. What our team did wasn’t physically or mentally demanding so we just got to talk and be together at our little table, and I learned things about my tablemates Mary Patrick and Patty and Betsy that I had not known before. And then once our work was done, we headed back to the Congregation House where I enjoyed some fabulous potato soup that an anonymous DCPC chef had prepared. And not only my body, but my spirit was nourished by the conversation that happened at the table that I shared with Ann and Nancy and John and Susan, only one of whom is actually a member of DCPC, but whom I hope after yesterday’s experience soon will be.

And maybe I am making more of it than it was, but I would have to say that the whole experience felt like God’s grace, like being a part of a transformed body that on one dreary, drippy Saturday morning wasn’t concerned with anything except experiencing God’s grace in that way that happens whenever we

do God's work in the world and give away, to be honest, not our everything, but at least a little bit of ourselves so that it might be on earth as it is in heaven.

And perhaps that is what Jesus imagined when he saw in the widow what he himself was called to do and when he gave away his everything for the sake of us all.

1. Debie Thomas, "The Widowed Prophet," www.journeywithjesus.net, November 1, 2015.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Scott Hoezee, Center for Excellence in Preaching, November 2, 2015.
4. Thomas.