

Mark 12:38-44

³⁸As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!
⁴⁰They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

⁴¹He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴For 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 12:38-44

There are many ways to interpret this passage and many messages that may be derived from what appears to be 2 stories; the first being Jesus' warning about the temple scribes and the second about the widow who gives the last of what she has to the church treasury.

There are even different ways to understand what Jesus means when he says about the widow,

“Truly I tell you the 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.”

Is he lifting up the widow as a shining example of great faith and profound stewardship,

or is he bemoaning the fact that somehow this widow has felt obligated or compelled to give even her last coins to the church,

who as He accuses earlier, devours widow's houses?

I can assure you that pastors all around the world are preaching stewardship sermons this morning,

it is that time of year and this would seem like the perfect Gospel passage to use.

Lets take a moment, however, to see what else going on.

At this point in Jesus' ministry He is back in Jerusalem having been welcomed by the crowds spreading their cloaks and palm branches on the road ahead of him.

Since being there he has been challenged by the Pharisees and scribes on matters of His authority, observance of the Sabbath, taxation, resurrection and the commandments.

While teaching in the temple Jesus has been critical of the religious leaders.

Now, some would say Jesus is giving His challengers a lesson on humility and pride.

Jesus condemns the scribes for “devouring widow’s houses”—shorthand for everything they have.

In the passage that immediately follows Jesus, perhaps as the culmination of his attack on the religious establishment foretells the destruction of the temple.

Following this He describes the end of the age and then comes the story of His death.

So in the context of Jesus' ministry what light does the story of this widow shine on our understanding of faith?

I believe it is the widow, as a segment of the society of Jesus' day, if not the one He observes at the treasury, who ties these two parts of this passage together,

or perhaps it is the widow in contrast to the scribe, or the religious machine itself that devours the widow's house.

What strikes me in this passage is the difference in relationship to God demonstrated by the characters,

Particularly if you measure that relationship against one of the challenges the scribes put before Jesus earlier:

“Which commandment is the first of all?”

Jesus’ answer was, “...you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Devotion to loving God and neighbor defines the relationship called for by Jesus and by the commandments.

It strikes me that devotion grown out of love in large part defines faith.

I have experienced many times, as I am sure many of you have experienced, someone being described as such a devout Christian.

As I thought about what that means or how it was determined that one would fit the criteria for being devout,

it seemed to me that it was by what one observed them doing, and more so than by what they said.

Devout people give of themselves, they make sacrifices for the sake of Christ and others.

They give their love first to God and then to their neighbor; the widow, the orphan the stranger, the homeless, hungry, the hurting.

They visibly have a positive impact on people's lives

Think of the scribes now for a moment.

Is what they did consistent with what they said,
or in this case what you would expect them to say
since we don't have them actually speaking in this
passage?

They devour widow's houses! Is this consistent with what we
would expect from the religious authority?

In this passage the widow does not speak either. She simply
comes and places the last of what she has in the receptacle
shaped like the bell of a trumpet

and listens to those two coins clink, clang and slide on the
metal as they fell into the coffer below.

She makes a great sacrifice, there is no denying.

But , before we make too much of the sacrifice lets take a
look at what it means to sacrifice.

In today's world, and particularly in our country, sacrifice
means to give up more than you should and less than you can.

There is always pain in making a sacrifice, and the pain
usually has more to do with giving up your own desires.

It is always better when someone else is doing it.

If you look up the root words for sacrifice you find that the word
derives from two Latin words put together.

Sacris and facio

Sacris or sacred, and facio meaning to make.

To sacrifice is to make sacred, or holy.

In this day and age we have come a long way from that in our understanding of the word sacrifice.

Those coins of the widow represent more than just money. They represent faith and belief and how these get lived out in a life devoted to your relationship with God, with Christ.

The poor widow valued her relationship with God and the Temple.

Isn't it interesting that she was among the poorest of the poor and yet she valued her relationship with God in a way that allowed her to give all she had to the Temple.

This woman knows that it is at the temple that she meets her God, and it is to the temple she comes to express her love and devotion to God;

the God she loves so much that she is willing and able to pour all she has into the Temple Treasury.

We want to be faithful to our calling both personally and collectively in our devotion to God and God's calling,

But there is a jump I don't want to make too quickly here today.

It is a jump that is easy to make and in the greater church these days it seems to me to get made too quickly.

It is the jump to serving others, the poor and needy.

This doesn't mean I don't care about the poor and needy, I certainly do,

But

I believe we jump over the loving God part to get to the loving neighbor, and in that jump we lose focus of our devotion to God which is to be at the core of, not only what we do, but who we are,

and that is the part we forget.

You don't have to be a Christian or believe in God to do good things.

But, we Lutheran type of Christians understand that God has done everything for us and in thanksgiving we devote ourselves to God and His work

in love of Him and for others.

A significant part of your devotion is coming here where I always pray you find yourself in the presence of God,

to give voice to your love for God,

to commit your life to God

to commend all you have to God,

because God has been faithful and good to you.

Those two coins represent a faith-filled offering presenting all of who you are and all you hope to become to God for service to the world

This offering in a sense is something other than prayer, tithes, Eucharist, or communion. It is not so much the act of giving or receiving, as it is the act of being,

Being God's, being devoted to God.

God gave us the gift of His Son Jesus Christ. God sacrificed His Son, Made Him Holy for you.

You can now gather at Christ's table to remember that sacrifice and what it means to your lives.

For St. Augustine our duty is to present ourselves—all of who we are—to God at Holy Communion.

Being joined then to Him you may take the grace and hope you find in the bread and wine and make it live in your life in ways that not only sustains you,

but models for others the enormous power of offering all of who you are to the rest of creation,

living a life devoted to your relationship with God.