

“A Widow and Two Coins”

October 24, 2021

Mark 12: 38-44 and Luke 21:1-4

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie Osterhoudt

During the months of October and November, many congregations across the country are invited to consider the meaning of Christian Stewardship. Stewardship was an important topic for Jesus. He has more to say about money than any other single topic in the gospels. Jesus understood the danger of money’s lure – how easily it becomes the god we worship. Jesus was concerned that we put God, and only God, first in our lives. Jesus implies in many of his teachings that the way we use our resources is reflective of our relationship with God and with other people. Are we investing only in ourselves? Or are we sharing God’s resources which have been entrusted to our care for the furtherance of God’s kingdom. Stewardship is not about giving to the church to meet a proposed budget. Don’t misunderstand me – budgets help us make wise and informed decisions. ***Stewardship, by definition, is sharing what resources God has entrusted to our care with an attitude of gratitude.*** It is not ***what*** we give that matters, but ***that*** we give. And Jesus tells us that the one to watch, the one person in the gospels who seems to get it, is the Widow at the Temple.

Prayer for Understanding

Scripture Reading Mark 12: 38-44 and Luke 21: 1-4

This is the classic story for Stewardship Season and one of my all-time favorites – the story of the widow’s mite. A mite was a copper coin and it was the smallest unit of money during Jesus’ day and time – about 1/10 of our penny in value. Some years ago, I preached on this story from the gospels and a man who was worshipping with our congregation that day was a coin dealer. He surprised me on Monday morning when he came by my office and gifted me with two of these copper coins. I became immediately concerned about where I would keep them safe – coins that were at least 2000 years old had to be pricey. He laughed at me, explaining that they were not worth much monetarily, even today, two millennia later. He went on to suggest that perhaps, instead of hiding them in a safe place, I should share them in the same generous spirit of the widow who first uncurled her fingers from around them. I usually pass them around the congregation when I preach on this story, but since we are still living with Covid, I will have them in my hand when you leave today, so you can take a look at them.

For the past month I have been considering the foundational concepts of, what I believe to be, Jesus’ teachings. And how, we as followers of Jesus

Christ, might put into practice those concepts. I contend that faith is not simply a set of beliefs about God, Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ, but faith is active; we are called to demonstrate our faith through our actions. We have considered the practice of becoming aware of God's presence in our everyday world; listening. The practice of humility grows out of an understanding that none of us are perfect or grasp God's ways in totality. As Christians, we are called to practice compassion and empathy when we interact with other people. And this week we will consider how Jesus Christ invites us, challenges us, to practice generosity.

The Cookie Story

A young woman was waiting for her flight from a local airport. Wanting to give herself plenty of time to get through security and find her gate, she had arrived early. She decided to buy a book and pass the time by reading. She also bought a packet of cookies. She sat down outside the assigned gate, next to a gentleman who was reading the newspaper, and opened her book. Soon she became engrossed in her book. She absently reached down to open her bag of cookies. When she took out the first cookie, the man sitting next to her also reached for the same bag and took out a cookie. "What nerve!" she thought, irritated but she remained silent. Again, she reached for a cookie, and the man also reached in the bag for another cookie. For each cookie the woman took, the man took one also.

This was absolutely infuriating her, but she didn't want to cause a scene.

One cookie remained and the woman thought: "What is this rude man going to do now?" The man calmly took the last cookie from the bag, broke it in half and, smiling, offered her one half. Ah! That was too much. In a huff, she took her book, gathered her things and stormed onto the plane. When she settled in her seat, she opened her book to read and reached into her purse to get her eyeglasses. To her surprise there was an unopened bag of cookies. Suddenly, she remembered that she had put her cookies in her purse. The bag of cookies she had shared with the man in the terminal was **his**, not **hers**. He had graciously shared his bag with her even though she had never asked nor thanked the man. He had even shared a half of the last cookie in the bag.

In this story are two mindsets/orientations toward life. The woman's - she was concerned with keeping her cookies for herself and sharing them with a stranger never entered her mind. And the man's - he was gracious and generous and willing to share what he had. The differences in these mindsets are reflected in this morning's gospel story of the woman at the temple treasury.

I actually am intrigued with Mark's account of the woman who contributes two coins, placing them in the Temple Treasury. Preceding this story of the widow, in chapter 10 of Mark's gospel, a rich man approaches

Jesus and asks him: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus eventually tells the rich man that to enter into God’s kingdom, he must shift his mindset and sell all that he owns, sharing his material wealth with the poor. The rich man could not do it – he could not empty his purse – and so he goes away grieving. In stark contrast, just a few chapters later, along comes a poor widow who approaches the Temple Treasury where she uncurls her fingers from around these two copper coins without even being asked and watches as they fall into the Temple offering plate, where they make such a small sound that only she can hear it.

As far as this widow knew, no one even saw her. But then again, no one ever saw her. She has no husband on this day – she appears in the story as a lone figure with little resources. In fact, you would think she had nothing to contribute. The Temple Treasury should have been used for her survival – that is why it was created – to support widows, orphans, and the poor in Jewish community. But this particular widow is a giver not just a receiver of what the Temple had to offer. I like to believe that she is motivated by trust and hope and generosity, not cynicism, criticism and fear. She seems to be one of life’s minor characters, one of the invisible people who come and go without anyone noticing what they do, or listening to what they have to say.

But Jesus saw her – watched her walk to the Temple Treasury and give up her two copper coins and something about the way she did it let him know that it was all she had, that she had nothing left which she had not turned over to God. The widow's sacrifice was complete, so complete that Jesus called his disciples over to witness it. "Truly I tell you" he says, "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 has put in everything she had to live on." She is the one to watch. Not the scribes who scramble for places of honor at banquet tables; not the religious elite who parade around in richly decorated robes; not the ones who offer eloquent and polished prayers for all to hear. No, the one to watch is this widow. She is the one who has something to teach us about stewardship – it is not what we give, but that we give.

Why did she do it? Why did she give back to God out of her poverty? No one expected her to contribute/no one would have faulted her for being the recipient of the Temple Treasury for the remainder of her days. Why did she give back? That is a good question for us to ask today – with so many folks struggling to make ends meet and put food on their tables. Why give back to God out of our poverty? My hunch is that the widow gave out of a sense of gratitude for all God had done and was doing in her life. A grateful heart sees God's blessings in everyday life and in the people surrounding

her. A grateful heart does not fear scarcity. Grateful people know, through experience, that in giving, our cups never come back empty. Sacrificial giving also considers the needs of others before self. There is no presumption accompanying the gift. No one is there to see her and she is not expecting any kind of acknowledgement or return favor. She knows that the most important things in life are not things – money or houses or cars or the money in our bank or savings accounts, but the people around us – our relationships with them and with our God. Sacrificial giving is about what is in our hearts.

When Jesus leaves the Temple with his disciples that day, according to both Mark and Luke, Jesus' public ministry is over. Four days later he will be dead, having uncurled his fingers from around his own offering, to give up his own life – the ultimate sacrifice. The one to watch, he says, is the widow with the two coins. What are you and I willing to let go of in order to model what it means to be a giver? And I don't believe that there is any greater lesson we can teach our children. They are watching us. It is not about what we give, it is that we give and it matters that our gifts come from generous and grateful hearts. If you want to know what Christian Stewardship is all about – the one to watch is the widow with the two copper coins.