

Series: Truth Telling
Sermon: Out of Their Abundance
Scripture: Mark 12:38-44

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38 *As 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, **39** and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! **40** They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." **41** He sat down opposite the treasury and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. **42** A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. **43** Then 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. **44** 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."*

Yesterday, I was thinking about hearing today's scripture in my childhood Sunday School class where we were being taught that God wants us to give all we have in order to be faithful. I realized I might have been more like the kid in the store yesterday, wanting to proclaim, "I ain't got nothing but this Wendy's coupon in my pocket, God. Don't expect too much from me." My grandmother, Geneva, was my Sunday school teacher. She would not have been amused. But I do remember thinking about all the adults I knew and how hard they worked in order to make enough money to give me and my sister and my cousins a good life...and how it didn't quite seem fair that God wanted all of it...which is how the story was, and still is, frequently taught. We imagine Jesus, watching the poor widow approach the treasury. My understanding of the temple treasury is that it was a metal, trumpet-like tube, people would drop their offerings in. Remember, they didn't have paper money back then. They had coins of different weights and made of differing materials, large, heavy gold coins. Silver, lighter, coins. And the tiny, near weightless copper coins...the mites...we sometimes call them.

Jesus has been sitting across from the treasury for some time and we can imagine the different sounds that ring from that trumpet-like tube...how a handful of gold coins might echo off the temple walls, making everyone turn and look to see who contributed so much to the temple...how a handful of silver coins might have sounded, tinkling lighter and yet still a beautiful gift. Maybe the scribes and the pharisees standing around would nod an acknowledgement of appreciation to the ones whose coins made the most noise...a greater gift should be greatly praised. And then comes the poor widow...her meager two copper coins barely making a tap-tap sound as they rattled down the tube.

The way the story has been taught, we might imagine Jesus watching, a tear gathering in his eye, as his love for her gift touches his heart. "Look," he says, "everyone else has been dropping money in out of their abundance. What they have given hasn't hurt them or even pinched their wallet. They have given but it wasn't a sacrifice for them to do so.

But this woman...this poor, widow woman has given everything she has to live on to God. What trust! What faith! What a gift!"

Now, it's easy to interpret the story this way because we know the importance of giving. The money given to the temple is meant for what we sometimes refer to a kingdom work. The money was used, much like in our own church today, for a general fund to carry out the work of worship and daily operations. It was used to support the priests and staff who worked there. And...it was used for missions. It was used to take care of those who could not take care of themselves...to help the poor...and especially, the widows and the orphans. So, giving to the temple...to the church...has always been important for it is where the work of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly before the Lord is carried out.

You might remember that phrase from the prophet Micah, who says the offering that God wants from us isn't just that we chuck a few extra coins in God's direction or give a bit of our abundance to please God, but it is instead being intentional about seeking justice, loving neighbors, and serving with humility that pleases God. This means that the offering we put in the church treasury is important and our giving should be thoughtful, intentional, and sacrificial, because it is work worthy of costing us something when used in ways that support, empower, and enrich God's kingdom for everyone...especially for the helpless, which in Jesus' day were the poor, the widow, and the orphan.

For this reason, we need to reimagine the scene outside the temple treasury. Jesus, sitting and watching the poor widow...Jesus listening to the "tap-tap" her two little coins made as they fell into the treasury coffers...Jesus with a tear gathering in his eye...not because he felt joy in what she had done, but because it broke his heart that she felt the need to do it.

To understand this, we have to think back to all that has happened since Jesus arrived in Jerusalem. He entered to palm branches and shouts of Hosanna, save us. He went straight to the temple where he overturned tables and ran out the money changers – you know, those who were there to exchange Roman currency for Temple currency, for a fee of course, so that people could have the right money to drop down that trumpet-like tube. Then came the outrage of the temple leaders for disrupting the system, for upending the status quo. Then came the rich young man asking, "What should I do to get into heaven?" and Jesus responds, "Obey the commandments, Love the lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." Great!" The young man shouts, "I've done all that!" "Great," Jesus says, "so now, go sell all you have and give it to the poor." And the young man walks away sad. And it is here...at that moment...that Jesus, no doubt weary from the disappointment of seeing a corrupt system and encountering faithful people determined to uphold it...sits down to watch the temple treasury. He sits and maybe his anger from turning over the tables is cooling into a seething, disappointed thing. He looks at the grand temple, the wealth it shows off...he

watches the leaders in their flowing robes and fancy ornamentation...he sees their nods of appreciation to the big givers...more wealth coming their way...and he says, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

There it is...you see it? They devour widows' houses. That is what changes the entire story for us. Those few words are what should move us from seeing this as Jesus' appreciation for a beautiful moment of sacrificial giving by a poor widow, to seeing it as more of his attempt to show us what he has been trying to show us since he entered the temple...that they have become more concerned with turning people into commodities than building and honoring relationship with them. Jesus' words are not affirmation for the widow's gift, they are condemnation and an attempt at accountability for a system that is supposed to care for the widow, not take from her. She is supposed to come to the temple and be supported by the abundant sharing of those who have more to give...but instead, she gives all she has so that others can be cared for.

What I mean is that Jesus is still overturning tables in this story. It isn't just a story about Jesus, meek and mild...it is a story of Jesus and fierce accountability. It is a moment in which he shows us that he meant everything he did when he ran out the money changers, and he meant everything he said when he told the rich young man to sell what he had and give it to the poor...the poor...like this widow who just gave all she had to the very place that should have been giving to her...and she didn't even get a nod of appreciation for it.

Maybe what we are meant to understand in Mark's story, is that we must be willing to boldly challenge systems that abuse rather than affirm...to refuse to be tolerant of systems that harm, and ways that are self-rewarding at the expense of others. Maybe what Jesus is really asking us is not, why aren't you giving everything, but instead...why aren't you turning over tables too? Why aren't you challenging the rich to think differently about how they use their wealth? Why are you tolerant of systems that harm when they could help? Systems that devour instead of deliver?

When we tolerate such things as injustice, hatred, and arrogance, we are propping up systems that do not value what God has commanded us to value: justice, love, and humility. We have always looked at the story of the Widow's mite as one of stewardship because it challenges us to consider how much we give to God: an amount that is sacred and sacrificial, or a Wendy's coupon worth...but I think we miss the point when we do that. Maybe faithful stewardship isn't marked so much by how much we give, but instead by ensuring that the system to which we give is intolerant of injustice, hate, and arrogance. Maybe faithful stewardship is giving to God as much as we can give because we trust that God's servants will find ways to hold our systems accountable to enacting

justice, embracing love, and walking humbly. Maybe faithful stewardship isn't expecting the poor to give all they have to God, without expecting the same of the rich.

Maybe that's why Jesus was so moved that day, watching the poor widow, hearing the tap tap of her two coins...because he knew, we still don't get it.

Holy and Merciful God,

We started our worship of you today with a question: With what shall we come before the Lord?

We acknowledge that too often we come with tolerance of things that shouldn't be tolerated,

We come with eyes that see generosity but ignore complicity in systems that harm. We come with ears tuned for abundance, and deaf to the small, tap tap sounds of the needy.

And we ask you to refocus our eyes and retune our ears to see and hear as Jesus does... For it is only in Christ that we can break down self-serving systems and embrace merciful ones.

It is only in Christ that we can eliminate hate-fueled systems and enact love-powered ones.

It is only in Christ that we can bring down the haughty and prideful systems and walk in humility beside one another.

May the work Christ started in the temple, be continued by the church willing to ask, With what shall we come before the Lord...