

Mark 12:38-44

Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 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. 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."*

Everything She Had - November 7, 2021

Mark 12:38-44

This week, we had an election in New Jersey. Governor Murphy won re-election for another four years. However, he won with a much smaller margin than he and most of the experts thought he would. I'm sure the so-called experts and politicians will be debating for months what happened. Was it a referendum on President Biden? Was it the voice of people tired of COVID and wearing masks and wary of being told to get vaccines by the government? Or something else? Apparently this election had the lowest turnout of any election in several decades. Does that mean people don't care? I don't know. I'm just a pastor.

But what I can tell you is that elections are about power. They are about giving those whom we choose the ability to tell us what to do. As we have learned during the COVID pandemic, the Governor does have considerable authority to tell us what to do and how to live our lives whether we like it or not.

I mean that Governor Murphy had the power to close down the state. We remember 18 months ago when the schools were closed, most businesses were closed, and we spent virtually all our time at home. Even now, despite vaccines, we are being encouraged to wear masks. At my elementary school just last week, we had to send home almost an entire class to quarantine for ten days. The pandemic is not over, not by far.

Power is real. Power shapes us and changes us. Power makes demands of us, whether we like it or not. Just try to get away with not paying taxes for a while. See what happens! Just try to start running red lights. See what happens! Just try to get your neighbors angry with you for whatever reason, see what happens! We all have a burden of rule-obeying laid on us. Sometimes the rules we follow we agree with, but never all of them!

And that is where we find the widow in our scripture passage today. Jesus stations himself in the Temple in Jerusalem and observes people contributing to the treasury — rich and poor, people from all walks of life. The requirement of the religious authorities was quite clear: everyone had to contribute ten percent of their income. That was what the scripture said, no exceptions. For some, ten percent was almost nothing. They had all they needed. They had more than enough. Ten percent? Hey, that was a bargain! Ten percent and I'm square with God? Who cares? Yet for others, ten percent, five percent, even one percent was hardly a "who cares" situation. For some, ten percent, five percent, one percent, or even any percent was a very big deal. The poor widow who came to the temple represented the people for whom any percent literally spelled the difference between life and death.

Nevertheless, the religious authorities insisted on people paying their money to the temple, whether they could afford it or not. So, yes, the poor widow came to the Temple and put her little bit in. As Jesus said, it was all she had to live on. Yet she did it anyway.

Friends, now is the time I'm supposed to say, "Look at the poor widow, see what faith she had! Folks, you all need to be just like her. Give, give, give. Give all you have. Give, as the slogan says, until it stops hurting"

But I'm not going to say that. Yes it's November and yes, around the church it's stewardship season. But you know something, folks? I am not, repeat not, going to tell you to be like the widow and give everything you have.

I'm not going to do because, quite frankly, Jesus did not tell anyone to emulate the widow and give every penny they had. He did not condemn her for giving, certainly. But neither did Jesus praise her! I repeat. Jesus saw the poor widow put all she had into the Temple Treasury and pointed that out to his disciples. However, he did not tell his followers to do the same. I don't think he is telling us to do the same, either.

Quite the contrary, Jesus is likely pointing out what the widow is doing to his disciples not as an example of good stewardship, but yet another example of how the religious authorities were literally squeezing the life out of the poor people while simultaneously blessing the rich.

Let's be frank, did the religious authorities care one bit about the pitiful amount the widow put in? Of course not. Her contribution made absolutely no difference toward the financial stability of the Temple. What did they care about? The big bucks, of course! Yes, the money coming in from the rich — that's what paid for everything, after all! The rich had the money, the rich had the power. Obviously the rich had the attention of the religious leadership.

And yes, my friends, in the Church of Jesus Christ, even today, isn't the rich who command our attention? The widows, the orphans, the homeless, the poor, are they not often merely and afterthought, some window dressing to assuage our consciences that we as the church actually stand for something different and something better than what the ways of the world dictate to us?

I'm not trying to sound critical or cynical. But it is a misuse of this scripture to imply that the sacrifice, and I do mean sacrifice, of the widow is an example God in Jesus Christ desires us to follow. I mean, I could easily say things like, "Look at her faith, she gave all she had to live on and was confident that somehow God would provide for her tomorrow." The implication is clear: you people listening to me ought to have the same faith that the widow had. Boy-oh-boy, folks if we all had her faith, imagine how much money this church would have! Imagine what we could do with it all!

But that is not the point of this story, not at all. The widow is not only an example of faith. Rather, she is also an example of a system gone horribly, horribly wrong. God does not demand or expect any of us to give everything we have to live on to God! Yes, there are a few examples in scripture, like our story today of the widow and the prophet Elijah where people did give up their last money or their last bit of food and were rewarded. I can tell you from personal experience about times when I myself have take risks to give up money and even jobs trusting that God would provide. And I can tell you that trusting God has indeed worked. However, I can also tell you that while I have trusted in God, the outcome God provided me was not the outcome I expected.

God does notice and appreciate our sacrifices, even when we have to make those sacrifices because of unfair and unjust systems. However, trusting in God has to be total. We have to also accept that the consequences of our sacrifices may be far different from what we want or expect.

I have no idea what that widow expected when she made her contribution to the Temple treasury. I'm sure she hoped that after giving all she had, God would somehow give her the means to live another day. But there is nothing in scripture that tells us God rewarded her materially for her faith. For all we know, that widow who gave all she had to live on died soon after. The widow may have indeed met her God, not on earth, but in heaven. We just don't know. But isn't that often the case when the powerful dominate the weak? Do we know, for example, what has happened to the Haitian refugees who were turned away at the United States boarder a few weeks ago? Do we know what is happening to the millions of people starving in Madagascar right now — people who are suffering horribly because climate change has dried up the rivers and diverted the monsoon rains these people have depended on for centuries? The United Nations calls what is happening in Madagascar the first demonstrable climate-change disaster. A warning, friends, a warning to us all.

So what am I saying here? Is the contribution of the widow, her giving everything she had, an example for us today or an example of the rich exploiting the poor?

You know I'm going to say a bit of both.

First and foremost, I cannot believe for a second that our God always expects us to surrender everything we have to live on as somehow proving our faith and opening ourselves to greater blessings. I do not believe God wants any of us to starve to death or cause ourselves to starve to death while giving everything we have to God. So, no, I do not ask any of you to give every penny you have to sacrifice to God when it will cost you your lives. Yes, there are certain times and certain situations where indeed God will ask certain individuals to sacrifice themselves. Starting with Jesus and followed by many, many others over the centuries, God has been with the men and women who have given the ultimate sacrifice of their lives for God. However, that is the exception, not the rule.

Nevertheless, that widow should never have felt that she had to give everything she had to the Temple. Quite the contrary, she should have been one of the first beneficiaries of the mountains of money the Temple treasury accumulated. That widow and the thousands like her, should have been helped, not exploited by the temple. From the beginning of the Laws of Moses, God commanded his people to care for the widows and orphans. There were many provisions in the Law to insure that God's people would take care of those who had nothing. God desired that no-one starve when there was plenty to be shared. The Temple had plenty. The religious authorities should have shared with those who had nothing, instead of sucking every penny they could from them.

But at the same time, does following Jesus require a level of faith that exceeds the minimal faith we see in society today? Yes. Did the widow believe in her God? Certainly. Despite the way she was treated, even ignored, by the Temple authorities, she believed and very much desired to be part of the work of the Temple, the work of her faith. Your merely being here today demonstrates that you personally consider this God stuff to make some kind of difference in your life. No doubt all of us could find other things to do on a Sunday morning. Yet, we choose to be here on line or in person. Whatever we are doing this Sunday morning is

making a difference for us and does call us to a different and better way of life and living. I dare assert that our faith in God does change us for the better and we are better off because of our faith.

Where is the good news in all of this? While we should not hold up the widow as an example of how to behave because she felt she had no choice but to give all that she had to the Temple, we can hold her up as a marvelous example of faith that exceeds our own.

This widow, this poor woman, was ignored by her faith community. But one person did notice her and that was Jesus. Faith is really our core belief that God really does notice us. God really does know us by name. God really does walk with us all the time through this journey called life and beyond. That was the faith of that widow that Jesus noticed. That can be our faith as well.

Is God on our side? Sometimes it is hard to say yes. Some of us have faced hard times not just once, but again and again and again. Some of us are suffering right now and are wondering whether God knows or cares about what is going on.

Nonetheless, the story of the widow and Jesus commenting on her is a way of assuring us that even when nobody seems to care about us and nobody notices what we are doing to serve God, God does know and God is aware of every single thing we do in God's name.

I may be the pastor of this church, but I certainly don't know everything that you as members do with and for each other. All I really know is that I don't know much about the ministry that happens at Collingswood Presbyterian Church: things I will never know. Certainly there are many things I wish I knew and never will. Certainly I wish there was a way for me to recognize and celebrate all the secret contributions so many of you make to the life and ministry of this congregation.

But the good news is that although I don't know and although many, most, or all of the people in this church don't know what each of us are doing to serve God, please know that God does know! Jesus does know and does recognize the contributions every one of us makes to our church, to our neighbors, to strangers, to our community, and to our world.

That is how we are just like that widow, giving what she had. Sometimes, we can give from our abundance but there are other times when we feel like we have nothing to give to anyone and still we give our time, our money, our ears, our love when we feel empty. That is what the widow did and even what we can do.

Today we gather again around the Table of the Lord. At this place, Jesus, fully aware that he was about to die, gave his followers the ultimate gift, the gift of himself. Today we eat the body and drink the blood of Christ as a way of reminding us that Jesus gave us all he could and in the acts of eating and drinking Jesus becomes part of ourselves.

The poor widow gave everything she had. Jesus gives us everything he has. How will we give what we have?

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.