

Scripture Lesson: Mark 12:38-44

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 46-47

³⁸As he taught, Jesus 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." ⁴¹Then he 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. ⁴³Jesus 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."

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Mark 12:38-44

10/27/2024 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

"Putting Saginaw FIRST"

Rev. Amy Terhune

"In one of his Lake Wobegone stories, Garrison Keillor tells about a Sunday morning in Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church. The sermon has been droning on far too long, and Clarence Bunsen has checked out early. He realizes it's almost time for the offering, so he quietly reaches for his wallet. Upon opening his wallet, Clarence discovers he has no cash. He takes out his pen and hides the checkbook in the middle of his Bible, next to one of the psalms. He begins to scratch out a check for thirty dollars, because he almost had a heart attack that week, and because somebody in the church will count the offering and he wants them to see he gave thirty dollars.

"He tries not to be obvious, but a lady to his right sees him. Clarence can tell she thinks he's writing in the pew Bible, so he doesn't look at what he's doing. She gives him a funny look and turns back to the sermon. Clarence tries to quietly rip the check out of the checkbook, with limited success, still not looking at what he's doing so the lady in the pew won't know he has written out a check in church. [I don't know why writing a check in church should be a problem, but apparently, it is for Clarence.] The offering plate comes by, and Clarence proudly puts in the check, only to realize a moment too late that he has just written a check for 300 dollars. He accidentally wrote three-zero-zero on two different lines when he wasn't looking.

"What could he do? On the one hand, he couldn't go downstairs after church and find the deacons counting the collection and say, "Fellows, there's been a mistake. I gave more than I really wanted to." On the other hand, he gave all he had in the checking account and a little more, so he and his family will have to eat beans and oatmeal for the rest of the month. One thing was for sure, notes Keillor. In that moment, Clarence Bunsen felt fully alive for the first time all week! [3 ¶s adapted from *No Box Seats In The Kingdom*, William G. Carter, CSS Publishing.]

Well, no kidding! Keillor may have come closer to the truth than he realized with that observation. It may just be that Clarence Bunsen was more alive than he had ever been. Neither Garrison Keillor nor Clarence Bunsen seems to be aware of a very basic truth we find in scripture, and that is this: real, true, authentic life depends on giving. Winston Churchill often said, "We make a living by what we get,

but we make a life by what we give.” And real, true, authentic life is what Jesus was particularly concerned with—what he wants for all of humankind.

Which may explain why Jesus is so interested in what people are giving. Our text this morning reports that Jesus came and sat down opposite the treasury and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. He watches them. He sits there and watches them. Which is a strange thing for Jesus to do. But keep in mind that confidentiality was not a value in Jesus’ day. In fact, the coffer at the temple were designed to allow people to make a bit of a scene. In the outer courtyard of the temple—often called the ‘Gentile’ court because gentiles could only come in that far—there stood these big brass or copper trumpet-like things. They looked like the big tuba-like speaker that used to stick up off of a really old phonograph player, only they were bigger. And remember that there was no such thing back then as paper money—everything was done with coins. So the rich would come along and dump these huge sacks of coins into these copper trumpet things, and the money would roll down it—making quite a clatter, obviously—and crash-land into a great big coiffeur at the bottom, on a lower level, which only the priests could access. Whenever one’s offering made a lot of noise, they drew attention to themselves and gained a certain degree of prestige and respect.

So Jesus is watch all of this when, quietly and without any show whatsoever, a poor widow steps into the scene. We don’t know if she hobbles over, crippled and stooped with age, or if she comes quickly and then hurries off, perhaps to little ones waiting at home. We don’t know her situation, but we do not that she does not go unseen by Jesus. Seizing the teachable moment that has fallen into his lap, Jesus lifts her up as an example to his disciples, commending her for her gift and her faithfulness. There are some important lessons here that we, like his disciples, must learn.

“Here’s the first one: We give in direct proportion to our faith. Think about that for a moment. Conventional wisdom says that we give in proportion to our resources. But that’s rarely true. [King Duncan, “Two Small Coins”, www.Sermons.com.] I know of a pastor who got himself into trouble when he prayed the following prayer after the offering had been collected: Dear Lord, no matter what we say or do, this is what we think of you.

There’s only one explanation for why that widow gave her last two coins. She gave, not because she could afford to, but because she believed in God, loved God, trusted God, knew God in her life. God had carried her thus far, and God would never leave nor forsake her. She knew it and she gave all she had. The choir sang this morning: where your treasure is, there your heart will be. We know exactly where this woman’s heart is. Is there any doubt about what she treasures? “Her gift foreshadows the one Jesus is about to make: His very life. II Cor. 8:9 reports: For [we] know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for [our] sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty [we] might become rich. [See Lamar Williamson, *Mark, “Interpretation”* Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983, p. 234.] She gives out of her complete and utter trust in God’s providence.

Trust is increasingly under threat in today’s world. For their own protection, we teach our children not to trust strangers. That’s understandable. But it carries over. In a competitive environment, we don’t trust the people we work with. In a dangerous world, we don’t trust the neighbors around us. We lock the doors and some even put in alarm systems and cameras. Increasingly, we don’t trust social institutions, news media, the justice system, even science isn’t universally trusted anymore. The church has suffered from a serious lack of trust—especially in the integrity of its clergy. All of this leads me to wonder if we trust in anything anymore. And more fundamentally, what does the erosion of trust say about us as a society? What will it mean for the generations that follow? I’m not advocating for stupidity or blind allegiance. We aren’t called to be doormats. But trust in others – in the basic goodness of humanity, and trust in a brighter future – a fundamental belief that the arc of the universe bends towards justice (to paraphrase Martin Luther King Jr.)— and trust in God – that God is at work in

the world - these are what give us hope. When they're lost, our world grows bleak very quickly, and we fall into fearful little groups siloed off in our safe space.

But hear this: You can't build the Kingdom of God in a silo. There's nothing safe about Kingdom-building. It's a risk. It requires trust. That widow trusted—she staked everything on God.

In protestant circles, this last Sunday in October is often celebrated as Reformation Sunday, commemorating Martin Luther's defiant act of nailing his 95 theses, or protests, against the catholic church to the door of the Wittenburg Cathedral on October 31, 1517. Within four years, he'd gained tremendous popularity in Germany advocating for the end of papal authority, decrying the selling of indulgences, and publishing the first bible in German so that the average person could read it. For these crimes, he was summoned to a trial, called a diet, by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in the town of Worms. There, in 1521 at the Diet of Worms, he was pressured by the high inquisitor to recant his written works against the church. He famously concluded his closing statement at the trial saying, ".My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against my conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other. May God help me. Amen."

We remember those words – defiant, audacious, principled – because they're spoken in a moment in history when the entire collected might of worldly powers were arrayed against him and Martin Luther would not yield. He staked everything on his conviction that heaven couldn't be bought, grace couldn't be earned, and the Holy Spirit could not be stopped. He put everything he had, every cent, every fiber of his being, into God's hands, and he reformed the church, to be sure – but he also changed the world. Luther laid the groundwork for the enlightenment, paving the way for scientific advancement, democratic government, and universal human rights. He was far from perfect, but like our widow, he was all in.

"Here's another thing her offering indicated that day: she believed in the work of God. The work of the temple was important to her and she wanted to support it. Doubtless, it was with pleasure that she dropped in her coins for she knew she was part of something bigger than herself. [adapted from "In Praise of a Widow" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.] And not only that, but she trusted that her two cents mattered to God's work in the world. She showed her trust, her faith, with her actions. She participated in the work of God. The temple may not notice her two cents, the others passing by may not have paid any attention, but she believed God would notice. And she believed God would use it to do good in the world. Something in her knew that she mattered, her drop in the bucket mattered, her participation mattered. And we know it does, because Jesus took the time to mark her example for all of human history to study and emulate.

In her book *This Far By Faith*, Rev. Faith Fowler of Cass Community UMC in the Cass Corridor talks about a unique experience with a woman who believed in the work of the church. The offering she brought was, perhaps, the most unique one Rev. Fowler had received. I think I've probably told this story before, but you can't go wrong with a good story. Here's how Rev. Fowler tells it in her own words:

"I was sitting in my office at the church that very first year at Cass. It was almost Christmas and I was ready to quit. The debt. The grants. The audit. The staff. The poor. The donors. I was a wreck, ready to call the bishop and request a circuit – four of five congregations – in the Upper Peninsula, when a knock came at the door. Actually, the person beat on the door as if it were a bass drum.

"Because I had gone to the finest seminary in the country, where they taught us about empathy and sympathy, compassion and counseling, "seeing Jesus" in the poor and "entertaining angels unaware", I yelled, "Go away, I'm busy!" In fact, I was agitated by the interruption. A Mt. Kilimanjaro-pile of paperwork awaited my attention.

“The intruder was not fazed. The banging began to sound like a battering ram. Every pound caused the door to shake in its frame as if the person behind it was saying, *I don't care how ugly you are I'm going to stand here and pelt this door until you let me in.* Then, because Boston University equipped its grads with tremendous pastoral tools, I screamed, “alright then, come in!” It was a good thing it wasn't the district superintendent.

“The door swung open ever so slowly and there on the other side was Carla. Even if I hadn't recognized her, I would have guessed her occupation immediately. She was every bit the television stereotype of a prostitute. Dressed in spandex tight pants with a loud, low cut top, a leather coat and thick make up, Carla was drenched in perfume...

“Without entering the office, Carl appointed her clawed index finger at my face. “Rev. Fowler, you've... got... to... get... her... off... my... corner!”

“...I looked up. Like one of the emaciated children cowering beside the ghost of Christmas present, a girl, perhaps 12 years old, was in Carla's clutch. At that moment, despite all of the excellent education that I have been privileged to receive, I couldn't think of a thing to say. I called for one of our caseworkers to begin the assessment process. My eyes follow them as the preteen was escorted out of my office. Then Carla and I sat there alone on opposite sides of my desk. She spoke quietly and I will never forget what she said. “You know Rev. Fowler, I wasn't so much worried about the competition, but when I looked at that little girl, I saw myself and I knew this church could save her.”

“The image of the child standing by my door and Carla's words spoken at my desk have been etched onto my soul. On days that I think I'm too busy to be bothered, they shame me. [7 ¶s adapted from Rev. Faith Fowler, *This Far By Faith* (Detroit MI: Cass Community Publishing House, 2014) pg. 216-217.] Carla lives in pretty dark world. She doesn't trust much. But she knows where there's good work happening. She knows there's still hope for that girl. She knows there's somebody in her neighborhood that's working for better and brighter today's as well as tomorrow's. And she knows where the light is. The offering she placed in the church's keeping that night was beyond price. It was life itself. In the face of unspeakable violence, terrible tragedy, or daily darkness, people come placing their trust and their hope in God's people, prepared to stake everything on God's ability to carry us through.

The widow in our lesson placed herself in God's service. And she trusted herself to God's hands. I'm asking us to do the same. I'm asking you to be part of God's work – to put God First; to put Saginaw first. Today, we bring our pledge cards and our offerings forward and place them in the treasure chest before the altar. The ushers are not going to pass the baskets. The act of coming forward is important. If you've already pledged, bring a card, put your name on it, and write “Duplicate”. If you're not ready to pledge, bring a card that says “I support First U.M.C.” If you're not able to come forward, raise your hand, and ushers will bring your gift forward on your behalf.

But keep in mind that as we come forward, we also bring ourselves. The widow put in everything she had to live on. It was a sacrifice that intimidates us and perhaps even frightens us. But it can't be denied that she had a living, vibrant faith and that she was unswervingly committed to and in love with the Living God of the universe. That much can be true of us too. Because there's good work to be done. Because we trust the present and the future in God's hands. Because we know where the light is. Because we trust in God to multiply what we give to advance wholeness and the fullness of life in our community. Friends, I don't want any Clarence Bunsens this morning. Give intentionally, faithfully, boldly. But like Clarence, I do pray that as you come forward, as you give, you feel fully alive, excited to see what God is going to do through us in the coming months. Come as you able.