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Mark 12:38-44

Like you, I have heard years of sermons on our gospel text. It appears in the fall and it's often preached as a "stewardship" sermon, perhaps on a day when pledges are turned in. Preachers usually focus on the widow. She serves as an exemplar for how we are to give. We're to give all of the money and resources that we have. We're to give our belongings to God to the degree that Christ gave for us.

It sounds unrealistic to my ears. Who of us would give all our money? It's not just a matter of practicality. That seems like poor stewardship to me. This widow probably was not responsible for the care of any other family members. But even so. Is it being good stewards of our bodies if we fail to provide food for them? I don't think so!

We seek to understand our gospel text anew this day. And it is important that Jesus denounces the scribes just before we hear about the widow today. That radically changes how we understand the widow's offering afterwards.

Jesus criticizes the behavior of the scribes, those:

“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.” *(Mk 12:38-40)*

The scribes were the epitome of educated people. They were obviously religious, as well. The root of Jesus’ critique is that they are hypocritical. They play up their positions of power – they delight in the honor and glory of it all. Yet it’s all for show. Their robes and prayers are just for appearances. When others are not looking, they take advantage of widows. Along with orphans, widows were the most vulnerable people in society. They were unconnected to a man who could provide for them, or speak for them.

With his critique, Jesus is reminding us of what scripture describes elsewhere. The life of faith is not something that just happens for a couple hours a week. To worship the God of Israel is more than just appearing in worship. Living our faith is a cohesive whole. When we worship and love God, that assumes that we love our neighbors and care for those in need.

We may think of these as Christian ideals. But the books of the Old Testament frequently talk about the need to care for the vulnerable in society: widows and orphans and refugees. To pray for those in need is also to open our hearts and our homes to those in need. In a life of faith and integrity, our prayer and worship

connect directly to the character of our relationships – both in and outside of church.

When Jesus criticizes the scribes, it is as if he is looking at the temple with a wide angle lens. He's taking it all in, picking out the inconsistencies on a grand scale.

With verse 41, Jesus looks closer into temple life. The camera lens focuses in, looking more at the details of the abuses that are happening.

Jesus “sat down opposite the treasury...” (in the temple) “...and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury.” (*Mk 12:41*) He watches as everyone gives money. Some historians speculate that this was the collection of a tax. If that's the case, the money being put into the treasury is not like passing an offering plate at church. It was more like a tax being collected at a central location. This puts an entirely different spin on the widow's mite.

For the widow may not have had much choice but to give all that she had. There may have been consequences if she did not pay her tax in full. Our U.S. tax system at least attempts for taxes to be proportional to one's income. The widow was paying a flat tax which was the same for everyone. The rich would have had no

problem paying it. But for the widow, all that she had was demanded. She would not have had money for food that week.

This is an extension of Jesus' critique of the scribes who "devour widows' houses." (*Mk 12:40*) Those who are in power are demanding that the poor and vulnerable give everything. They are left with absolutely nothing. They were already poor, and the tax made them destitute. This text is certainly about stewardship, but not how we usually think of it. The temple leaders were not being good stewards of their people. They took advantage of the most vulnerable on many levels. Jesus denounces these ways of abusing our relationships.

As with all our scripture passages, we can see ourselves in a couple places in our text. We can see ourselves in the widow's place. It may seem as though there are forces taking advantage of us in our world. We are unemployed, or not working as we want to be. Our homes are threatened. Medical bills are daunting. Savings and retirement money disappears. The economy forces us to make challenging choices about money. Our faith should impact those choices – we ask, what does it mean to be good stewards of our wallets?

Yet the widow is not just a victim of the system in our text. Jesus holds her up as a picture of virtue amid a system that seeks to take advantage of her. She still

gives all that she has, just as Christ did. But her faith made it possible for her to let go of everything. If she had starved afterwards, Jesus would have told us. Somehow she had enough faith and trust in God to give everything away. Somehow God provided for her.

Our gospel is a word of grace for those of us who need to make financial sacrifices. Jesus celebrates this lady who is able to give her money freely. Even if this were a tax, she could have chosen not to pay it. Yet she seems to understand her money as a gift from God. She trusts that though she gives her all, God will provide for her future. She is a person of faith, and her faith makes a difference in how she views her money. God makes it possible for her to give in unimaginable ways.

Our text also speaks to us about what it means to live our faith with integrity. Emanuel's has certainly been feeling an economic squeeze, as many of us have. We have been drawing upon our memorial fund savings in order to meet our budgets each year. And there's not much more that we can streamline to make it happen.

The answer is not for our congregation or its leaders to become bullies. We don't have any heavies to go out and shake the last coins from everyone's pockets. The church should be a place of grace and giving. We should be expressing care for those who are in hard times – not abusing them in their vulnerability. We need to be

good stewards of one another: caring for one another's wounds; bearing one another's burdens; encouraging one another as disciples. We are a people of love and justice.

Our faith makes a difference for us, too. As disciples, God transforms how we view all things related to money. How we invite contributions as a church. How we give. And how we spend.

All of these practices should reflect our love for and trust in God. All of them should be vehicles of our faithful stewardship – caring for our relationships and for those in need.

Jesus' words to us today – of both criticism and praise – call us to follow God's guidance in all our financial choices. To pray through them. To trust that the faithful path will also be the prudent path. We are promised answers and God's help along the way. What a blessing! And what a challenge. Amen.