

PSALM 127

*Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labour in vain.
Unless the LORD guards the city,
the guard keeps watch in vain.
It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for he gives sleep to his beloved.*

*Sons are indeed a heritage from the LORD,
the fruit of the womb a reward.
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the sons of one's youth.
Happy is the man who has
his quiver full of them.
He shall not be put to shame
when he speaks with his enemies in the
gate.*

Mark 12:38-44 (NRSV)

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 market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'

He 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.'

The Word of the Lord...

Don't stop me if you've heard that one before.

It's a November tradition in churches throughout the western hemisphere. Lectionary passages about money "just so happen" to coincide with pledge card time; releasing the preachers from their December thru October money muzzles. And this year there are 5 Sundays.

Good thing they start us off slowly with such an easy passage. From title to text this Scripture is perfect for any pastor looking for a guilt hammer. You can name it something clever like: *The Widow's Might* (m-i-g-h-t) and preach it with withering glares.

Are you looking for the ultimate symbol of devotion and faithfulness? Here she is! Who needs long-winded interpretation? Greed is bad – 1 million dollars. True piety is good – 0 dollars. Offering up your very last farthing to God? Priceless.

Of course that may be reading more into this than Jesus intended. "Some may read this passage as Jesus commending the widow for her sacrifice, but those who read the text carefully realize that Jesus does not do this. Rather, he simply tells his disciples that the two

small coins she gave are worth more than the gifts of the rich persons who gave much more money but sacrificed very little."¹

If we go to this passage purely from a guilt standpoint then why would Jesus focus more on what the widow does give than on what the Scribes don't give? And as people of abundance it would be nice to get some clarity on the difference between contributing out of abundance vs. out of poverty. Quite frankly, I prefer to give out of abundance. Does the abundance put me in the place of the Scribes? To put it another way, do I have to give all the way to my last 2 pennies in order for Jesus to be pleased? Or am I just supposed to preach that?

So the passage isn't about guilt. Well then maybe this passage is a warning against religious and political systems run amuck. Jesus is snarking at the system that creates scribes with long robes that the widow pays for. Down with banks charging 30% interest on loans. Down with credit card companies charging for not using their credit. Down with tax cuts for the rich while the working class picks up the tab. This temple will crumble! This country will disintegrate!

No wonder he stops her from paying.

Oh. Wait a minute... if this is what this passage means – then why didn't Jesus stop the widow before she gave her money to the Temple?

I wonder if this passage is less about guilt and more about love.

...less about garnering status and more about giving hearts.

...less about distrust in a system and more about trust in God.

The meaning of this passage is not what we think. It's a good thing too because we cannot compete with the Mighty Widow. And quite frankly, it's a little easier that way. Sacrifice is always best when someone else is doing it.

If we lift the Widow up onto a pedestal then the focus can be on her giving and sure the inadequacy of ours... but nothing has to change. On a pedestal there is only room for one and we are more than happy to have it be her. No one could expect us to sacrifice it all!

And so I invite us to pull our focus away from widow, scribes and temple... and instead focus on two copper coins.

Forget the time of year.

Nevermind the minion scribes vs. mighty widow.

The value in those two coins is not monetary.

Those coins represent more than money. They represent faith and belief and how these must be lived out in our lives in concrete acts... The coins represent faith-filled offering found in representing all who we are and all we hope to become to God for service to the

world. Indeed, offering this sense is something other than prayer, tithes, or Communion. It is not so much the act of giving or receiving, as it is the act of being.²

St. Augustine wrote that we are supposed to present all of who we are to God during Communion. Pushing one step further, "how can we take the grace and hope we find in the fruit of the vine and the bread and make it live in our lives in ways that not only sustain us, but models for others the enormous power of offering all of who we are to the rest of creation? This is not something that we can do at arm's length. If we become those two small copper coins, we must live our lives in such a way that our offering is truly shared with others."³

How do we do this? Well I'm sure it's different for each of us, but here is my 2 cents:
It's the person who quietly agrees to teach Sunday school another year.
It's the person who brings a meal and some conversation to someone home from the hospital.
It's the person who takes time to send a card that says, 'Hey, I'm thinking about you.'
It's the person who decides to give more next year.
It's the person who says, "Sure I can do that" rather than "there's no way I can."

It's the one who makes it less about guilt and more about love.

It's the one who walks away from status and focuses instead on the heart.

It's the one who lets go of their distrust in a system and puts their trust in God.

Love.

Give.

Trust.

But that's just my 2 cents. What's yours?

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Rodger Y. Nishioka. *Feasting on the Word – Year B, Vol. 4*. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. Mark 12:38-44, "Pastoral Perspective," p. 286.

² Ibid. Emilie M. Townes. "Theological Perspective".

³ Ibid. p. 288.