

“Two Cents Worth” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey  
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Text: Mark 12:37-44 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 honor 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.’

Wow.

It doesn’t get much better than this! The assigned lectionary coincides precisely with our assigned Sunday task! On our first Stewardship Sunday we get to hear about a woman who gave her all! How often does this happen?

Imagine the scene. Jesus is in Jerusalem during the days leading up to Good Friday, and he has been busy clearing the temple and teaching about rendering to Caesar and marriage in afterlife and the Great Commandment. Now he goes back into the Temple to rest, just hanging out with his disciples, people watching: watching people as they come and go, wondering about their stories. They watch everyone, including the scribes, the religious leaders in the community; and Jesus notes the way they flaunt their long flowing robes and how their very public long prayers showcase them as devout followers of their faith; Jesus remarks on how they take the front row seats and devour widow’s houses.

Devour widow’s houses? In the first century, that would have been a stunning metaphor. Women had very little power in the best of circumstances, and once their husbands died, they had even less –they had no way of caring for themselves. As with the orphans of the community, the Temple, the religious ones, were expected to provide for them.

The disciples had little time to reflect on this comment, for Jesus moves away to take a seat right across from the Temple treasury box. He notices the rich people coming and going, putting in large sums of money. He also notices a widow. We don’t know if she is young or old, if she has children to care for or if they are grown. We are told she is poor, and she has only two small coins to drop in the box.

I would like to read that section of the passage again. Please close your eyes if you are comfortable with that. Take a deep breath in... and now let it out slowly. Leave everything else that is on your mind and imagine the scene. Listen and watch the people imagine you are that widow with your last two coins.

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The two coins were all that you had. The two coins are your heart, your strength, your mind, and your might. And the treasury is God and you are bringing your heart, mind, soul, and strength to God. Lesson preached. End of Story.

Or is it?

How often do we hear someone say, “Here’s my two cents worth.” That 2 cent reference comes directly from this story! “Here is what I’ve got.” It is a both/and statement. It is self-deprecatory in that it downplays the value of the thought. But it is self-affirming in that the speaker clearly has a thought that he or she deems worthy. This text is also both/and. The widow gives her all – but she gives it to the very institution that is supposed to be caring for her! Our heroine was not a poor widow; she was poor because she was a widow. The widow is an example of a generous and trusting faith, but her money will go to support corrupt and hypocritical scribes.

Remember that the culture of the empire colored the lives of all who lived in Palestine under Roman rule. The scribes surely did not seek their position with the goal of becoming elite and ethically suspect clergy. But the influence of the empire slowly eroded the boundaries of the Torah. A life committed to community, culture, and creative encounter with God was quietly replaced by patronage, a system fostering a hunger for protection and respectability, a desire for special attention. Here is where the ancient text and the modern context cross paths. The faith community came to reflect the values of the empire instead of the empire reflecting the values of the faith community

I read a commentary about this passage from Otis Moss III, pastor of Trinity UCC in Chicago – yes the same church of Rev. Jeremiah Wright and President Obama. Rev. Moss talks about the antebellum enslaved Africans who would routinely ask one another, “Have you got good religion?” Good religion, he says, is religion rooted in love, justice, forgiveness, grace, hope – the core of the Gospel narrative for these plantation slaves. Bad religion, to them, was religion rich in ritual and doctrine but anemic in living out love, justice, forgiveness. The Gospel narrative of liberation, God's Preferential Option for the Poor, was nowhere to be seen,

This question of “good religion” haunts Mark 12 just as it haunted the spirits of African slaves in America, and just as it should haunt us. The Jesus painted on Mark’s canvas is uneasy about ritual without soul and tradition without love. Good religion holds the values of love, mercy, and justice as the dominant themes to offset an uncertain world of exile and a shifting moral compass.

Does today's church still offer bad religion? Are we the scribes Jesus warns his community about? Are folks reluctant to seek out church because they see it as a corrupt institution which takes pennies from the widow and parades big donors for all to see?

I don't need to tell you that the chasm between the rich and the poor has been widening over the last decades, and that it shows no sign of doing anything but getting bigger. Not because the poor are more lazy or less deserving, but because the deck is ever more stacked in favor of those already wealthy -- the ones in the position to make the rules. As in the time of Mark's gospel, wealth in our own times seems to have assumed a right to be, and a right to be protected, no matter what happens to others. This was a major issue in our financial collapse and it is a major back-story to the nation health care debate.

The text denounces the injustice of the religious institution in Jesus time, and by extension, the injustice of institutions today that perpetuate injustice. This passage is an admonition to the church. But it is also an admiration of the widow. The point is two-fold, like that 2 cents. It is about integrity.

The scribes are hypocritical and insensitive. The widow, however, is honorable and filled with trust. Even though she has been made poor by a corrupt system, she continues to place her trust in God. The scribes may be "devouring widows." But that widow has her call as well, her sense of duty. She makes her offering as a way to serve, to belong, to breathe a prayer and to renew her faith. She does it without thinking. She is unaware that anyone has noticed her. She has no expectations of great reward. She simply does the right thing. And Jesus sees her.

She is more like the people I try not to see. What she does rarely makes sense by any ordinary human standards. It is as if she gets her orders from some other planet, where superior beings know things we do not yet know, such as how to let go of the little that you have in order to receive the more that you so not yet have—or how to trust what you cannot see more than you trust what you can.

If the widow is anything, she is a prophet, a foreshadowing of Jesus Himself. After all, the widow gave her living to a corrupt church. Jesus was about to give his life to a corrupt world.

Are you the scribes gone awry? Jesus asks. Is your religion being eroded by your encounter with the empire? Does your religion support the oppressor and abandon the marginalized? Have you got good religion? Can you, with that early American slave community, always answer the question with the words "Certainly Lord?" The widow could. Her story remains the all time great story of Christian giving. She did what the rich young ruler could not do; she gave everything she had to the church without even being asked. It was as easy as uncurling her fingers from around two copper coins and letting them fall into the Temple treasury. And she was invisible, except to Jesus. In the last of his dizzy lessons in the upside down kingdom of God, where the last shall be first and the great shall be the servants of all, the most unlikely people will turn out to be Christ in disguise.

The language of caution presented by Jesus was designed to challenge the faith community to wrestle with its value system. Beware of absorbing the values of the empire! But the lesson is also that faithfulness in giving is not for the sake of the recipient, but it is for the life of the giver.

Why does my particular gift, any one of my individual actions, matter in the great scheme of things? Why does it matter if I recycle my cans and newspapers every Thursday morning, when my small piece is such a puny effort? Why should I pray and fight for the ordination of Lisa Larges when the odds continue to be huge? Why should I believe every single day that war can end and health care can happen? Because it will change me, to exercise this kind of faithfulness. It will put me in the hands of God.

The widow's mite turns out to be a piece of Might. And that's my 2 cents worth for today!