

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word

Nov. 8, 2015

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Clarksburg, WV

Mark 12:38-44

(Jesus said) "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury." Mark 12:43 N.R.S.V.)

Of Great and Small

There is a funny thing about people who believe in reincarnation. Have you ever noticed that these people always claim that in a previous life they were someone famous? Somehow no one ever says, "In a previous life I was third apprentice to the stable master. I spent all day, every day, mucking out the horse stalls." No, instead they say, "I was Queen Elizabeth or Julius Creaser, or Napoleon."

Everyone claims that in a previous life they were someone important and powerful. It is part of human nature to want to be someone important, someone respected and highly valued. We all want to feel important.

In our lesson from Mark, Jesus speaks to that longing. Jesus does not discourage people from wanting to be great. Instead Jesus redefines what it means to be great in the kingdom of God.

In the first section, Jesus warns us not to be like the scribes. He says the scribes like to wear fine clothes and be greeted with respect in the streets. Well, most of us like to dress in nice clothes and be greeted with respect. But the criticism here is not the fine clothes and respect from others. The criticism here is that it is all show and no substance.

Jesus says, "They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." In those days women had almost no rights. They were not allowed to own property and were also not allowed to learn to read and write.

As a show of piety, the scribes would often visit the homes of those whose husbands had recently died. The scribes would advise the widow on how to settle the estate. It was not unusual in those cases for the entire estate to be left to the temple. Even if the husband had not wanted his estate settled in such a matter, the scribes would take advantage of the grieving and illiterate widow, so that the temple got everything and the widow was left with nothing to live on.

The scribes wrapped up their heartless abuse and theft with religious ritual and flowery prayers. As if that made it all okay.

I'm reminded of a friend of mine who grew up in Alabama. She said that people in the South seemed to believe that it is okay to say bad things about others as long as you tacked on the phrase, "Bless their heart." For example: "My father-in-law is the biggest drunk and liar in town . . . Bless his heart." "My next door neighbor is an inconsiderate bore. She is always throwing her trash over into my yard . . . Bless her heart."

Jesus makes it plain that real compassion and loving action count in the kingdom. You will not be able to fool God by trying to dress up your lack of compassion with spiritual language. God knows our heart.

The second section of our text presents the same thought from the opposite side. Jesus is watching the people come past the poor box at the temple. There were 13 trumpet shaped containers placed along the temple wall. As people came in and out of the temple, they would put money in these containers. The money was to be used to help the poor.

Many rich people came by that day and put in large amounts of money. Jesus watched that without comment. Then he suddenly got really excited. He said, "Did you see that? That poor widow dropped in her last two cents. Now that, he said, is faith! You want to know what greatness looks like in the kingdom of God? There it is!"

This poor widow was a nobody as far as most people were concerned. She would never have her name listed on the "who's who list" of the Jerusalem website. We are not even told her name. Yet Jesus holds her up as one of the great heroes of the faith.

Jesus does not condemn the other people who came by and put in their offerings. That money would be put to good use. He simply points out that those who put in large sums were doing so out of their left overs. This poor widow gave everything. She gave compassionately and sacrificially.

Perhaps Jesus was thinking here of his own impending death, where he would give up everything on the cross for us.

In the past when I have preached on this text, it has been in a stewardship setting. I have pointed out that giving God our leftovers, does good in the world. But giving to God's work sacrificially changes us.

This morning, however, I want to go in a slightly different direction. One of the contributors to the magazine, "Dynamic Preaching," wondered if the widow who gave her last two cents that day was one of the women who had been taken advantage of by the scribes. Maybe she was in such dire straits that day, because her home had been stolen from her by one of the scribes.

I find that an intriguing thought. If so, this woman would be even more a hero of the faith. Many people have been hurt by the church down through the ages. It is a sad thing but the old saying is true: "The church is the only army in the world that shoots its wounded."

The church is not a fortress for saints, it is a hospital for sinners. The church is filled with us imperfect people. Sometimes we can say the most hurtful things to one another. Usually we don't intend to be hurtful, but we are. I once had an older woman tell me that she and her husband used to prepare the cookies and refreshments for fellowship time after church. One day, one of the other ladies of the church remarked to her, "I'm glad you are doing this, you don't do anything else around the church." I knew this second lady. She was a good and kindhearted woman. I have no idea what possessed her that day to say something so hurtful. But apparently she did. This woman who was hurt said to me, "We didn't quit coming to church, but that was the last time we did the fellowship time."

The widow who gave her last two cents might well have been angry with the temple or the temple leaders, but she did not let that kill her faith.

This widow could also have been angry with God. I know a number of people who have quit believing in God because they lost a loved one. This widow could have been blaming God for the loss of her husband. She could have complained to God that because he let her husband die, she was now homeless.

People get angry with God for all kinds of lesser reasons. The story is told of a young boy whose job it was to go get the milk cows from the pasture and drive them to the barn for milking. No, I am not talking about myself, but I can relate.

One day the milk cows did not want to go to the barn. They kept running off and circling back to the field. When they want to, cows can run much faster than a person. So it wasn't long before this boy was red in the face from exertion, sweaty, and frustrated. He shook his fist at the sky and shouted, "This is all your fault!"

This boy just knew that God was up there watching and perhaps even laughing at him. He just knew that somehow his problem with the cows was all God's fault.

I don't believe that God ever laughs at us or mocks us. But at the same time it can be difficult. God is all seeing, all knowing, and all powerful. So even though I don't believe that God sends bad things our way, God is involved. God could change things, but sometimes chooses not to.

Now listen carefully here. I am not suggesting that it is wrong to be angry at God. The danger is in allowing that anger to turn into bitterness such that we turn away from God.

If we are in a genuine relationship with God, there will be times when we are angry with God. Why not? We get angry with our parents sometimes. We get angry with our spouses sometimes. We get angry with our children sometimes. The anger is not the problem. God is certainly big enough to handle our getting angry with him.

The challenge is to stay in relationship even when we do not understand, even when we are hurting, even when we are so mad we can't see straight. Good relationships endure because those involved stay and work through the anger.

You know the real miracle is that most people who are hurt by someone in the church don't leave. If everyone who had ever been hurt by another member of the church left, there would be no church to leave. It is a testimony not only to our faith, but also to the grace of God, that the church continues. The church continues sometimes with our help and sometimes in spite of us. But always the church continues by the grace, love, and power of God.

The widow in our story may have been angry with God, but we can't know that. She may have been angry with the scribes and church leadership. We can't know that. She may have been through bouts of depression and despair. We can't know that either.

What we do know is that she is still coming to the temple, still worshiping God, still trying to do her part, still caring and still loving.

Jesus got all excited that day. He said, "Did you see that? That widow there, she has given her all. Now that is faith! That's what I have been talking about!"

Amen.