

All The Right Reasons

Mark 12:38-44

November 8, 2009

I.

Today's gospel reading has two parts, both of which are susceptible to being used by preachers for all the wrong reasons. But the reading also makes some good points we can take to heart for all the right reasons as we worship God and live together in our church community.

The first part is about the scribes in their fancy robes who were more concerned about elaborate rituals and their own glorification than the work they were supposed to do in the synagogues. Jesus' criticism of the scribes was based on their false sense of importance.

The second part of the story is about Jesus' observations as he sat in front of the temple treasury and watched people approach and put money into the temple coffers. Jesus contrasted the large gifts made by rich people with a meager gift made by a poor widow, and he praised the widow because of the sincerity of her offering.

I will briefly mention the part about the scribes. As background, scribes were associated with the religious sect of the Pharisees, and many were teachers of the law. Negative images of them in Scripture include false piety, ostentatious worship, and self-aggrandizing interaction with others. They focused on outward appearances intended to glorify themselves and increase their stature. Although they were supposed to be men of God, they were living as men of the world.

This set the stage for the rest of the story, which is about money. And I suppose it's not a coincidence that our reading comes in the middle of stewardship campaigns. The lectionary is designed that way. This reading is being heard all over the country today in Episcopal Churches, Catholic Churches, Lutheran Churches, and many Methodist Churches that use the lectionary.

But the reading is not just about stewardship; it also raises a larger question. And so today I don't want to talk about stewardship as such, but rather use it, and the example of the widow, to address the larger question. It's a question that calls us to think about how we decide what is important in our lives.

II.

In many ways our priorities are formed within the context of society and culture. We talk with each other, we interact with each other, and we have relationships with each other. This process shapes our goals and expectations.

But what happens when we talk with God, and interact with God, and have a relationship with God? Does anything change? Are the things that are important to us when we are sitting at home any different from the things that are important to us when we are sitting in church?

I want to believe they are not. I would pray that our values, our principles, and our ideals are the same in both places. And I am hopefully confident that what we take from the church influences and guides what we do at home.

You all know that for many years I was a lawyer. And I have encountered many jokes and stories about my former profession; most of them funny and some of them true. Someone once said that ninety-nine percent of the lawyers give the rest of them a bad name.

I don't think that's correct, but I do recall a story that presents my old colleagues in an unflattering light. It's about a wealthy lawyer who was visited by someone from a local charity seeking a donation to the charity's program.

During the visit the lawyer said, "You know, my brother-in-law has two young children, and he has terminal cancer but no insurance." The person from the charity expressed his sympathy.

Then the lawyer told of his cousin who lost his retirement money in the stock market, and was living on welfare. The person from the charity said he was sorry to hear that.

Finally the lawyer said that his own mother was barely able to make ends meet, and was still taking in laundry to pay for the groceries. The charity representative was starting to get the picture, and so he thanked the lawyer for his time, and started to leave.

But the lawyer stopped him and asked: "So, if I don't give my money to any of them, what makes you think I would give anything to you?"

It's clear this fellow did not have his heart in the right place. And that is the point of the rest of the sermon. We are called to have generosity in our hearts and to do things for the right reasons. I believe we have that attitude here at St. Thomas. And in many ways I believe that we all are living examples of the meaning behind this story in today's Gospel.

III.

So let's go to this reading about the poor widow who gave her last two coins to the temple. This can be looked at in two ways. The good news is that the widow gave generously. The bad news is that she didn't leave herself anything on which to live.

But the point here is not the story taken literally, but rather the story taken in perspective. And Jesus established that perspective by drawing contrasts in the reading. On one hand were some wealthy people who gave only from their abundance; who only contributed to the Temple after they first had satisfied all of their own needs. To use a more contemporary phrase, they gave what was left, not what was right.

But the widow did just the opposite. She did not give out of her surplus, but rather from what she needed for herself. She might have been a first century example of the pledge card in today's cartoon on your bulletin inserts. You can see that the pledge card has two parts. One is a question as to how much you made, and the other is an instruction to send it in.

We all know that cartoon is intended to be humorous, and I hope we also know that no one is asked to do what the poor widow did by giving all she had. Instead, the teaching of this reading is not found in how much we give but rather why we give.

In modern terms, for example, today's Gospel tells us that the wealthy founder of a computer company who gives away billions of dollars is no more important in God's kingdom than the boy who gives only a small amount, but it comes from the money earned on his paper route. The real value is less in the money itself, and more in the habits of our hearts.

But it's important to note that Jesus did not criticize wealthy people because of their wealth. Nowhere in Scripture is there any teaching that wealth is a bad thing. Jesus only spoke harshly of it when it appeared that wealth was separated from generosity.

IV.

So when this widow dropped her two coins in the box two thousand years ago she probably had no idea that her simple selfless act would live on in Scripture as an example of true discipleship. St. Paul recognized this a few years later when he said "the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have" (2 Cor. 8:12)

And we don't know whatever happened to the widow in today's Gospel. She appeared briefly and is never mentioned again, although it is likely that in Jesus' compassion she was blessed. But I am familiar with another story about another widow who lives in today's world. And it comes to mind whenever I hear this reading from Mark's Gospel.

This modern day widow had five children and was barely able to care for her family. But she was a regular worshipper at church, and somehow the priest learned that she was giving \$100 each month to the church, which was a tithe on her income and benefits.

So he called in one of his deacons and pointed out that this money was a lot more important to the widow than the church. He asked the deacon to tell her she should feel no obligation to give money to the church, and she was free from any responsibility to do so.

The deacon then met with the widow and conveyed what he thought was the priest's caring and compassionate suggestion. And as he spoke she began to look downcast and tears came to her eyes. He asked what was wrong, and she said, "I want to tell you that you are taking away the last thing that gives meaning and dignity to my life."

God was important to her. Faith was a part of her life. And while she might have been poorer than many people based on her financial statements, she was rich in her heart in believing that God had blessed her. Like the poor widow in today's reading, this twenty-first century widow made God her priority.

V.

This leads back to the beginning of this sermon and my comments about how we decide what's important in our lives, and how we set our priorities. We know that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke tell us that where our treasure is, there also we will find our hearts (Mt. 6:21, Lk. 12:34).

And to paraphrase those messages from Matthew and Luke, I believe we can say that where our stewardship is, there also we encounter our faith.

Today's Gospel described a widow with a big heart who lived in poverty. Although the reading praised her heart, it did not set forth poverty as a holy objective. Jesus did not say "go out and be poor." Today's reading is a model for becoming a disciple, not for becoming destitute.

And discipleship means honoring God and giving back to God when we complete our pledge cards. But it's more than money. It also involves giving to God from our hearts and in our attitudes, and bringing our motives for doing all things in line with God's will for us.

These two stories of the worldly scribes and the godly widow illustrate the conflicts and tensions we all face as we live in the world and try to serve God. They also describe burdens the church carries as it works to overcome the scribes who would use the church for their own purposes, and as it models the stewardship of the poor widow.

And so we are called to examine the reasons why we do what we do, both in the world and in church. When we search ourselves we find that whatever we do and wherever we go we take with us what is in our hearts. And in that inevitable day when we all are called to account for the content of our lives, one of the questions will be, "were we scribes, or were we stewards?" I know that the people of St. Thomas are stewards. *Amen.*