

Giving In Faith
Mark 12:38-44
November 11, 2012

I.

We begin by remembering that today is Veterans Day, when we honor all who have served in the Armed Services of our nation. And some of us might remember that many years ago we celebrated today as Armistice Day, which recognized the cessation of hostilities on the Western Front of World War I.

Both reasons for remembrance call to mind our freedoms, and the brave men and women who have served so valiantly to preserve them.

And speaking of brave people, after I finish this sermon Ashley Tibbs will come up here for a few minutes and speak to us about stewardship. This will be the third consecutive week someone has talked about this, but is also will be the last. Stewardship Sunday is next week.

And if you are here for the first time today, please know that we don't always talk about money, but when we do so it is in the context of honoring God. Giving to God is an important spiritual practice in our lives, and in the life of the church.

That's true not because I say so, and not because of anything Ashley might say, but because Jesus said so, not only in today's gospel reading, but throughout all four Gospels.

And I suppose it's not a coincidence that today's reading comes toward the end of stewardship campaigns. This story of the poor widow is being heard all over the country today in Episcopal Churches, Catholic Churches, Lutheran Churches, some Methodist Churches, and many others.

But while the reading certainly focuses upon stewardship, it does so in a way that raises a larger question about what is important in our lives, and why.

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 ongoing process helps to shape our goals and expectations.

But does the same thing happen when we talk with God, and interact with God, and have a relationship with God? Do we ask God to help shape our goals and expectations? Are the things that are important to us at home any different from the things that are important to us in church?

II.

Today's reading, which has two parts, offers an opportunity to consider that question. The first part is about the Jewish scribes in their fancy robes who were more concerned about their own glorification than their work in the synagogues. This certainly lends itself to a sermon about pride and a false sense of self-importance. But that is not the subject for today.

Instead I want to focus on the second part about what Jesus said as he sat in front of the temple treasury and watched people approach and put money into the temple coffers.

And we might begin by asking why Jesus was doing this anyway. Why did he watch people as they made contributions, and then comment about it? Could we get away with that? What if we watched each other as the collection plates were passed, and then whispered something to our neighbors about someone else's contribution?

Things were entirely different back then. There were no envelopes or paper money. All currency was metal coins. And the collection plates would not have come to you, but instead you would have walked to the temple treasury where there were large pipe-like openings shaped like the bell of a horn. People congregated around them. They were designed to be gathering places.

And after you got there you would have waited your turn to drop your coins into this bell-shaped opening with a loud clatter. The more coins there were, the more noise it would make. Giving to the temple was intended to be a very public act.

And so anyone hanging around the treasury could have seen what Jesus saw, and could have said what he said. It probably only would have been necessary to have had a sense of how much noise certain coins would make.

III.

So let's look at what happened. Wealthy people approached the treasury and dropped in their many coins. Then someone, known to be a poor widow, came and put in two small copper coins, apparently just about all she had at the time.

This caused Jesus to point out how the large gifts made by rich people contrasted with a small gift made by a poor widow, and he praised the widow because of the sincerity of her offering.

He described to his disciples how some wealthy people gave only from their abundance; they 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 could have used for herself. And it probably was not the first time the widow had given in this way. She trusted in God to honor her gift.

The teaching of this reading therefore is not directed to how much we give, but rather why we give. For example, today's Gospel would tell us that the wealthy founder of a computer company who gives away millions 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.

And so God cares less about the amount of money, and more about the habits of our hearts. God knows what we do and why we do it. We cannot rationalize our gifts in God's eyes. God knows what is right when he sees it. He calls us to remember that all we have comes from God, and that we are to return to him a portion of the blessings that he, in his grace, has provided to us.

IV.

I would imagine that when this widow dropped her coins into the temple treasury two thousand years ago she had no idea that her simple selfless act would live on in Scripture as an example of true discipleship. St. Paul recognized this idea 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 an elderly mother, and was barely able to support and care for all of them. And somehow her priest learned that she was giving \$150 each month to the church, which was a tithe on her income and benefits.

So he called in one of the deacons and pointed out that this money was a lot more important to the widow than the church. He asked the deacon to go 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 met with the widow and conveyed what he thought was the priest's caring and compassionate suggestion. He said she could keep the money, and anticipated that the widow would be pleased.

But as he spoke the widow began to look downcast, and then 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 condition, 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 also 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. 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 also 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 instead is a model for being a disciple.

And discipleship means honoring God and giving back to God when we complete our pledge cards. It means giving to God from our hearts, and bringing our motives in line with God's will for us. It means doing the right thing for the right reasons for ourselves, and for the church.

As we wrap up, I ask you to think about this. We have heard about the golden age of many things; the golden age of art, or literature, or music. One of my favorite documentaries is about the golden age of baseball. These images look to the past.

What about the golden age of St. Thomas? Is it in the past or in the future? During 2012 we celebrated our 30th anniversary, and remembered our many steps forward over the years, as well as a few steps back. And I believe we can say that our golden age is yet to come.

And it is closer than we might think. We can make it happen, here among ourselves and in the community. I believe we can sense God's spirit working and growing in this church.

Right now, as we worship the Lord in spirit and truth, people in the community also are looking for something of substance in which they can believe and can follow. We can help them find it and connect with meaning beyond themselves.

Jesus offered that to the disciples, and through him we can offer it now. In an uncertain world our Lord is the light that shows the way, and he calls us to shine that light in our own lives as well as the lives of others. Our faithful stewardship can help us do that. *Amen.*