

## **Out of Her Poverty – November 8, 2015 – Mark 12**

**Rev. Rachel A. Wann**

As you may know, our church uses the Revised Common Lectionary for our weekly scripture lessons. The lectionary is a three year cycle of readings that covers a good portion of the Bible over those three years. Passages come from the Old Testament, a Psalm, a Gospel lesson, and an alternate reading from the New Testament. As you know this year we've been taking a close look at the Gospel of Mark. Churches all over the world follow these same readings, and not just Presbyterian churches. Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran, American Baptist, and Catholic churches all have the option of following the lectionary. Now we aren't required to follow the lectionary cycle, but it is a good way of covering much of the Bible in a three year period.

So today, churches all over the world are hearing sermons on the story found in Mark's Gospel. It is such a well-known story that it has been given the title, the Widow's Mite. Perhaps you recall hearing it before. This is also the time of year when churches all over the world are conducting stewardship campaigns, to encourage their members to give generously to the church. It's not just a plea for money, but also to promote mission and outreach opportunities and to get people to utilize their specific strengths in service to the church. The theme of many stewardship campaigns focuses on three types of giving - time, talents, and treasure. Give of your time in service to the church and to God's work in the world. Use your talents, your specific abilities, to help others. And give of your treasure, or your financial resources, to support the work of the church.

The story of the Widow's Mite is often used to encourage sacrificial giving. Look at this poor widow, who gave everything she had, her last two cents, to the Temple. She is often praised for her faith and reliance on God to care for her needs and her willingness to sacrifice all she had in order to give to the Temple treasury. Even though she only had a few pennies, she gave it all away in service to God and the temple. Her example should be an inspiration to us all, to dig deep into our pockets and give as generously as she gave. Her story is romanticized into this exceptional tale of what it means to give up everything and completely trust in God to care for her.

In this interpretation of the passage, the widow is the premier example of what it means to give wholeheartedly to God. If we all responded in this manner, meeting the church budget would never again be an issue. Churches could start all kinds of new ministry opportunities and really make a positive difference in the lives of others. Emulating the widow's sacrifice is the popular interpretation of the passage. That she is the ideal giver. In Jesus' words to his disciples, perhaps you can hear a note of awe, as he presents her example to them, "The

others give out of their abundance. She, in her poverty, has given everything she has." In this interpretation, we can almost hear Jesus say to them and to us, "Go and do likewise."

I am not suggesting that we ignore this woman's sacrifice. Indeed, her heart was in the right place. She gave out of her piety and her love and reverence for God. We should have a similar attitude when we give. This poor widow was doing what was expected of her by the religious authorities. And that's the key to the other possible interpretation of this passage. What did the religious authorities tell the people God wanted and expected of them? What did the religious establishment teach the people about caring for the poor? Instead of praising the woman for her sacrifice of everything, is Jesus perhaps condemning a system that not only ignores the poor, but exploits them to the point of giving up everything?

Leading up to this passage, Jesus has been very harsh in his condemnation of the temple practices and the theology of the scribes. The majority of the scribes and other religious leaders had aggressively confronted Jesus and were looking for a way to destroy him. Jesus judged them harshly in his appraisal of their practices.

In the first few verses of our lesson Jesus was a teaching a crowd who had gathered around him. He renounced the so-called piety of the scribes. He told the people to be wary of them and their showy rituals. He denounced the leaders as hypocrites, frauds, and deceivers. Their actions are flashy and loud. They parade about in their long, flowing robes to cover their insincerity. They expect to be greeted as stars in the marketplace and receive the seats of honor at banquets and in worship.

If you've ever read Dante's *Inferno*, the punishment for religious hypocrites is suitable to their offense. As they reside eternally in hell, they are forced to wear beautiful, long flowing robes. They appear mighty impressive on the outside, but inside the robes are lined with lead. The weight causes every step to be agonizing, and even the act of standing up is quite painful. For those who had lived ugly and selfish lives on the inside, while exhibiting flashy piety on the outside, the writer Dante has given them a fitting punishment.

Jesus is harsh in his assessment of the scribes. He calls them vain, arrogant, pompous and proud. And he completes his diatribe by denouncing them for devouring the houses of widows. In some way, the scholars aren't completely certain, but in some way the scribes were eating up the estates of widows. Defrauding the widows into spending their money unnecessarily, instead of using it for their own basic needs. One idea is that the scribes had been selling their religious services and were taking advantage of the vulnerability of the widows.

Widows were powerless. They were women who had no men to take care of them. They had no status in society. It was even worse if they had no sons. Widows were easily preyed upon.

What is shocking is that Jewish law provided for the care of widows. It was commandment of God to care for the poor, the destitute, the orphans and the widows. The corrupt scribes knew this, yet ignored their responsibility to care for them.

In our Bible study class on the book of Ruth, we see one provision for the care of widows and other poor. Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi were both widows. Furthermore, Ruth was a foreigner, but chose to follow Naomi back to her people in the town of Bethlehem. Jewish law required providing assistance to widows who had no means to survive.

One such practice was that of gleaning. During the harvest time, landowners were instructed not to reap to the very edges of their fields or to remove all the fruit from an orchard. They were to leave the excess in the field or orchard and allow widows and foreigners to gather it up. In this way, the poor could gather the extra grain and fruit for themselves to eat. This is not unlike our modern day food pantries. This and other provisions for caring for the poor are included in the Jewish Law, yet the unjust religious leaders cared only for their own prosperity.

After his condemnation of the scribes, Jesus went to the treasury of the temple. He sat down near where people were depositing their offerings. It was here that he saw the rich folks putting in large sums of money. He noted that they gave out of their abundance. This in itself is worthy of some consideration and could be the topic of an entire sermon. Giving out of their abundance. First, taking care of all their own needs, wants and desires, and then from whatever is left over, giving that to God. That in itself is a reverse image of what giving should look like.

On the Internet I read a humorous story shared by a Canadian pastor. At one point in Canada, the \$2 bill and the \$1000 bill were both printed on pink colored paper. At the end of their journeys in the pocketbooks of numerous Canadians, a tattered \$2 bill and a worn \$1000 bill were making the trek back to the mint to be destroyed. For whatever reason, the mint preferred burning like colored bills together, so the \$2 bill and the \$1000 bill, both being pink, had a chance to become acquainted. To pass the time before heading to the incinerator, they decided to share their life stories. The \$1000 bill told of all the fancy cars he purchased, the expensive cruises, the fine jewelry, the designer clothing. He had quite the extravagant life. The \$2 bill was very impressed. Then the \$1000 bill asked the \$2 bill about his life. "Well," began the \$2 bill, "my life was not nearly as glamorous. All it was, was church, church, church, church...."

While he was sitting across from the treasury, Jesus watched the poor widow deposit her two pennies, everything that she had. It is in this overall context of the passage, that of the hypocrisy of the scribes and their devouring of the estates of widows, that Jesus makes his

comments regarding her donation, that she gave everything that she had. Is he praising her sacrifice, or is he further condemning the scribes for a system that takes advantage of an already poor and vulnerable population?

Is this an example of good stewardship, or is this a further example of how corrupt the temple system had become, that forced destitute widows to give until they had nothing left? Was it exasperation in the voice of Jesus that commented on a system that neglected the poor and manipulated them into further poverty? She gave all she had. She shouldn't have had to do that. Something is terribly wrong with a system that required her to do that.

I've often wondered what happened to that particular widow. Penniless, her only choice now was to beg for her survival. Perhaps Jesus sent one of his disciples after her to offer her a little food. Perhaps she even became a follower of Jesus. We don't know. And we don't know how many more women, and orphans, and destitute individuals were neglected by the system that was supposed to help them but instead, ignored them. The temple system was abandoning its responsibility to care for those in need. It makes you wonder where all the money was going, doesn't it? Jesus noted that the rich were pouring money into the coffers, but how was it being used?

As Christians it is our responsibility to give generously of ourselves – both financially and in our personal involvement. But the systems we support, whether it is the church or other agencies, should actually be making a difference in the lives of others. And we need to be holding those systems accountable.

I'll close with a story I found about a Christian church in Nashville, TN, that took serious its responsibility to reach out to the poor. They realized that affordable housing was a critical need for the working poor in their community. They had some extra land adjoining their church building. The land was to eventually be used to expand the church parking in anticipation of future church growth. Instead, they gave up the land so it could be used to build affordable housing. Five homes were built on the land and were made available to families who had no homes. An unforeseen result of this effort was a growth in church membership, as those in the community who once felt invisible and rejected finally found a community of faith centered in grace and committed to helping others.