

³⁸ As he was teaching, he said, “Watch out for the legal experts. They like to walk around in long robes. They want to be greeted with honor in the markets. ³⁹ They long for places of honor in the synagogues and at banquets. ⁴⁰ They are the ones who cheat widows out of their homes, and to show off they say long prayers. They will be judged most harshly.”

⁴¹ Jesus sat across from the collection box for the temple treasury and observed how the crowd gave their money. Many rich people were throwing in lots of money. ⁴² One poor widow came forward and put in two small copper coins worth a penny.^[a] ⁴³ Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I assure you that this poor widow has put in more than everyone who’s been putting money in the treasury. ⁴⁴ All of them are giving out of their spare change. But she from her hopeless poverty has given everything she had, even what she needed to live on.”

Preparing to preach a stewardship sermon I decided not to tell you how great FPC BG is, because you already know that. I decided not to tell you more about the Deacons’ shop or the highly successful Christmas ministry, because you already know that and support it with your time and treasure. I decided not to tell you about the Outreach Committee and how vital and lifegiving that ministry is. I decided not to tell you how essential to the ministries of FPC BG and of the larger church your generosity is. I decided not to tell you how bright the future looks for this congregation if adequate resources are in place. All of you already knows that. I doubt seriously that many, or any, of you here are waiting to hear what the preacher has to say before filling out your pledge card.

No, I don’t intend to tell you anything. I want to suggest instead that you and I have a particular, even, peculiar, thing to tell the world. What the church has to tell the world is something that the world does not know and will not know if you and I do not tell the world the truth.

I begin with some basic things that world believes, and contrast them with what faith has enable you and me to know:

The world believes that you give what you can; faith invites us to consider that all we have is a gift from God.

The world believes that if you don't look out for yourself, nobody else will. Faith dares say that "Whoever would save their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for Jesus' sake will find it."

The world can't make up whom it admires the most. Prospective students at a university were asked to submit essays on the question, "If you could spend an evening with any one person, living, deceased, or fictional, whom would you choose and why?" The top three choices of the 8,000 essayists were God, Jesus, and the college dropout and founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, 3rd richest man in the world." The world is confused.

Frank Sinatra sang the world's favorite song, "I Did It My Way!" Faith sings, "All that I have is thine alone, a trust O Lord from you." The philosopher Nietzsche poses the world's question, "Why would anybody want to be in the embarrassing condition of being in need of the love and grace of God?" 3

The world hates to acknowledge its need for God; faith knows that all we need is God.

Faith has strange sounding things to say to the world, and nothing sounds more odd-ball to the world than the story we heard from Scripture this morning. The theme sounds so simple enough. All we need is God.

You'd think, if Jesus wanted anybody to pay attention to the truth like that, he'd have been a little more sophisticated about it. Why wouldn't he call our attention to the rich people with the large sums who put their money into the Temple treasury, the ones in the chinchilla coats, the ones with great big jewels on their fingers and sleek little sports cars parked out front? Why would he by-pass all those beautiful people and make a bee-line for the widow in the shaggy sweater with shiny elbows? Why would he wrap her so lovingly and beautifully in his words and offer her to us as if she were the most precious gift Jesus could give us?

The Catholic Theologian, Henri Nouwen, reflecting on the mystery of this woman, offers a clue as to why Jesus wants to pay attention to the likes of her. He writes: "To give, not from your wealth, but from your want, is the great challenge of the Gospel. The point is not so much to choose poverty as to trust God fully." He goes on to say, 4

“When I look critically at my life, I find that my generosity always occurs in the context of great wealth. I give some of my money, some of my energy, some of my time, some of my thoughts to God and others, but enough money, time, energy, and thoughts always remain to maintain my own security. Thus, I never really give God a chance to show me God’s boundless love.”

What Jesus wants us to see in the widow is not the poverty in her life but the richness of her faith. It is as much of a mistake to say that Jesus wants all of us to give all that we have away as it is to say that Jesus doesn’t want any of us to do that. The point is not so much to choose poverty as to trust God! It is not an economic dilemma. It is a dilemma concerning our very essence, our very being.

Jesus sits down outside the temple treasury and witnesses a devout act of faith. The faithful are presenting their offerings to God but Jesus rebukes the temple keepers, those who run around in long robes and devour the widow’s homes. This is a slam against the Institutional Religion that sees its wealth as a blessing from God.

We get the sense that there is a procession and everyone comes forward and lays their gifts on the altar.

I envision coins spilling over as the rich throw their money in. The scene is loud with lots of movement. Only a keen eye would even notice the widow shovel her way to the altar and place in her coins, place in her all.

Jesus has eyes that cut to the heart. This widow’s giving announces to the world who she is and whose she is. In the giving of her two copper coins, she accepts God’s claim on her as God’s beloved daughter. This widow is claiming she is not without family, she is sealed into God’s family. She is not without position for God has claimed her as God’s own child and she is willing to lay her all before the altar. This simple act of faith is a grand celebration.

As we read the Gospel of Mark, we see the strategic placement of this story. Jesus and his unwitting disciples are in Jerusalem laying claim on the Kingdom of God. Just before this offering is received, Jesus has warned us of prideful, arrogance demonstrated by the teachers of the law. And what immediately follows our text today is Jesus’ announcement of the coming of the end and his betrayal, arrest, execution and resurrection where Jesus contrasts other religious leaders of the day who became rich and powerful in the world.

Jesus gives his all to the world. He gives his all to us, to you and to me. Jesus raises the bar quite high for us. The message of the widow's offering and the message of Jesus Christ's life and death is one in the same.

It is the message of giving our best, not the left over, but giving our all in return to the One who gave us all life and all good gifts.

This message is so contrary to what the world proclaims that we often miss it. Measuring the magnitude of the gift is demonstrated in our full understanding that all we have is a gift from God. All, everything- everyone. It's all gift. Thanks be to God.

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