

Sunday - November 8, 2009  
Pastor - Rev. Paula P. Werner  
Sermon - **Giving: It us Optional**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be formed by your grace for you are our Lord our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

**Mark 12:38 – 44**

I preach from this book; it's called the Bible, but it is also a Life Counseling Text and a Financial Handbook. It gives instructions on those parts of our lives over which we have some options: our time and our money. I take seriously what is said. I spend a lot of time, figuring out the message from so long ago for you and me today. Sometimes, it's a bit hard to decipher, because the symbols and metaphors are so different from today. But when it comes to time and money..... the Bible --- the Financial Handbook, the Life Counseling Text --- speaks loudly and clearly in ways that were relevant yesterday and today. Maybe the Bible speaks more specifically and relevantly than we feel comfortable with.

Let's first make sure we are all on the same page: I'm going to ask a few questions and I'd like you to answer silently.

- 1) Do you basically accept this book as a guide on how to live your life?
- 2) Do you believe that Jesus has something relevant to say to you?
- 3) Do you believe that you are supposed to follow what Jesus says to do, as reported in this book?

If you silently answered "yes" to these 3 questions, then let's see what today's story means for us today.

The reading began with Jesus and his disciples in the temple. Jesus is teaching and observing the religious leaders of his day. Not only does he describe the scene for us, Jesus offers a critique on the motivations of the scribes – the religious leaders. These men wear long robes and like being greeted with respect wherever they go. They are obviously caught up in their own self-importance. Jesus says that they have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. This would indicate that they associate with the rich, that the priests have taken on the trappings of wealth and power. For the sake of appearance they say long prayers; all they do, is done in order to look good and pious.

Then Jesus condemns them with these words, "they devour widows' houses..... they will receive the greater condemnation." So what do the 4 words, "they devour widows' houses" mean. Well, perhaps they acted as guardians for widows who lacked male relatives and in their actions on the widows' behalf, they did not take care of the affairs properly. Or perhaps the religious leaders accepted hospitality from widows in order to support their tastes for wealth and power. We don't know for sure but we know that Jesus took strong stands against the religious leaders' practices of his day..... where they were corrupt.

These scribes – religious leaders in the temple wanted to look good, to be well-fed and acknowledged for their position, to receive what they thought was their due according to their exalted station in life, in other words they looked like and acted like aristocracy. Jesus said they would receive the greater condemnation for taking advantage of those they were supposed to serve.

We also like to look good, to accumulate a certain amount in order to be considered “in”, or having “made it in life.” How much do we really need to accumulate? We will soon be in the season where every advertisement in the paper, radio, TV, computer and a walk through the malls will encourage us to say “yes to more of everything.” How much do we really need? Have you ever asked yourself that question and pondered the answer? How much do I really need? When the department store ad says “say yes to more of everything.” Do we forget that more of everything comes at a cost to our values, our stewardship of our resources, our priorities.

So this book – this story --- Jesus’ words have been rather harsh about those who are the religious leaders and wealthy.

Our reading says that “Jesus sat down opposite the treasury” – other translations say, “Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury.” In the Jerusalem temple, there were 13 chests shaped much like trumpets – large at one end smaller at the other, into which the offerings were placed. Not only could Jesus “see” what those making offerings were doing, all could “hear” as well. The large, heavy, expensive coins, those would make noise when they clattered into the chests. The rich could afford to put in large sums.

Yet, that is not what catches Jesus’ ear and eye..... he notices and comments to his disciples on this poor, no name, nondescript woman. Her clothing, her lined face, her worn look, all tell him that she is a widow.... Barely scraping by. She is out of the mainstream of productive society; she is overlooked by others, just doesn’t matter in the bigger scheme of things. She has no power, no political pull; she is not invited to the sumptuous feasts like the scribes and high religious leaders Jesus has just talked about. She is not someone who is asked for her opinions, not someone who is asked to give a prayer out loud like the scribes. She is one of the so-called “invisible” ones. But not to Jesus.

Jesus saw what she did; Jesus noticed her. You see, you and I do not have to be the powerbrokers, the high society types, the celebrities to be noticed by God. For God notices what is important --- and what was important about the widow was that she truly loved God, with all her heart. When you love, you want to give...and that is what she did.

The amount? Trivial, truly trivial..... absolutely unimportant in terms of its ability to help the temple treasury even in her day --- 2 small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. So why did Jesus notice and consider it so important? Because Jesus saw that the widow had given her heart to God. She had not given a token, she had not given a percentage.... My goodness, other places in the Bible it tells us that we are to tithe—which means give 10% back to God. This woman did not obey that 10% figure..... she gave 100%. Her two pennies

equate to total commitment to God, total trust that God will provide for her now that she is penniless. Her devotion, her commitment of faith is a metaphor for discipleship --- for absolute surrender to and dependence upon God.

Another thing stands out about this widow. She gives her offering entirely voluntarily – no one has asked her for it. It is her freewill offering.

I have a sneaky suspicion that the people during Jesus' time both liked and disliked this story about a day in the life of Jesus. I imagine the people hearing this story retold were downright pleased that Jesus condemned the rich and powerful, the religious leaders who flaunted their wealth and importance. But we can't get too smug in hearing Jesus criticize them, for then the example of the widow confronts us..... This widow certainly had options..... she could have walked past the temple treasury and held onto her two coins, but that was not the option she chose. She gave her heart to God – that was the only option she felt open to her.... The money.... Well, that is just the physical , material outgrowth of a heart fully committed to God.

And you and I are left sitting here ---- likely reveling in Jesus' recognition of her and holding her up as a model.....until, ... until you and I realize that Jesus is holding her up as a model for you and your life.... And me and mine.