

Sunday, November 8, 2015 – Stewardship I, Installation of Council
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Mark 12:38-44

The Widow's Offering?

Maybe you've heard the recent story in the news about the small college in upstate New York, and the large donation, and the name change, and the court case. A wealthy donor wanted to give the college a very, very large gift: 20 million dollars, but the gift came with a stipulation—that the donor's name be added to the name of the college. This proved controversial, and it went to court, where a judge ruled that according to the college's founding documents, the college could not change its name. At this announcement, the donor withdrew the gift, took it back.

This kind of giving (or lack of giving) sounds like the very thing that Jesus is critiquing in today's gospel reading. The passage begins with Jesus warning about scribes, the religious leaders who wear long robes and sit in important places, who do things for the sake of appearances, for show. They come under fierce condemnation. In contrast, and receiving high commendation, is a nameless widow, who has barely anything to give, but gives it all.

What a fitting reading for a Sunday with a focus on Stewardship—the pastor might be thinking. She could even get all geeky and go to the Greek, point out the literal meaning of the verb used for putting in offerings: In the original text it says that the rich people and the widow “toss” or even “throw” in their offerings. What a great gospel for a Stewardship campaign with a basketball theme! Let's do the children's sermon again, and toss the basketball in an offering basket!

The gospel, however, is much more complicated. You don't need to know Greek to know that, you only need to have ever held a penny and thought about where you put it. In the gospel passage itself, you may also have noted that while the widow and wealthy scribes are compared in what they give, this is not the only way they are connected. The word “widow” appears before the widow herself does. Early in the reading Jesus says that the scribes devour widow's houses; this poor woman is just the kind of person their condemned behavior affects; their showy ways are part of a system that is corrupt. Is it really such a good thing that this woman puts all that she has into that? Then, if you continue reading past where today's passage ends, in the very next verses you hear Jesus' foretelling the Temple's destruction. Jesus says that every stone, every last brick of that building will come down. Is it really such a good thing that this woman put her only pennies there, into a building that will soon be destroyed?

It just so happens that we as a church have recently had a focus on a building and giving money to it. Our buildings are not indestructible, sadly not even after all our recent work. The institution they serve is not without fault. We don't usually put a person's name on church structures, but we too have ways of drawing attention to giving. Is this really such a good reading for a Stewardship Sunday?

I hope at this point you, like me, are feeling a little uncomfortable, because if we're not feeling a little uncomfortable, we're not talking about stewardship in a faithful way. Talking about money in church, about what we do or don't do with the money we do or don't have, raises complicated and uncomfortable questions. There are questions of financial status and future needs, there are questions of motivation and means, there are questions about fiscal or even ethical soundness. The questions are there in the biblical text, and they are in our lives as well. We have children we want to send to college, or we live on a fixed income, or we lack an

income. Can we afford to give? The church has its problems; the people in it can treat each other poorly. Should we give to that?

We must wrestle with these complicated questions to be faithful to the text—and to be faithful stewards. We must wrestle with the complications of our own financial situations. As a church, we do so by having an offering, every single Sunday, right in the middle of worship, and by having a stewardship campaign every fall. As we think about offerings, let's take a closer look at what Jesus says about the widow's offering. The gospel story today may be more complicated than it first appears, but what is clear is that Jesus commends the widow. He praises not how much she gives, but how. There are two aspects to what Jesus praises: that she gives out of her poverty, and that she gives all.

Giving out of poverty does not usually make the news, not like the \$20 million gift that wasn't—but, as Jesus pointed out, it is still the case that the portion of society that is most generous is on the other end of the spectrum. Studies show that as a percentage of income, charitable giving decreases as wealth increases. Where are we on this spectrum? Or, who are we in this Bible story? (I am all too aware that I am wearing a long robe and have a very nice seat here.) Giving out of poverty does not mean that the church should be shaking down widows for every last penny. Jesus had some pointed words to say about that, too. Giving out of poverty does mean that every person can give. Jesus does not presume to tell someone they don't have anything to offer, and neither should we. There is a radical egalitarianism about stewardship: everyone can do it. Every gift, no matter its size, is of great value, and those gifts, your gifts, that are given in special and difficult circumstances, are especially valued.

Yet more than this, giving out of poverty reminds us of our actual position, our true economy in relation to God. This is summarized nicely by the last words of Martin Luther. On his deathbed, after affirming his faith, Luther's last words are said to be, "We are beggars, all." Now, at first this may sound like another example of Lutherans' sometimes dour worldview, "We are beggars, all," but it's actually an honest announcement, which can orient us towards gratitude, and generosity. We bring nothing into this world and we can take nothing out of it. All we have, we have been given. Life itself is a gift. What we do with it, that we are able to give, is all a giving back.

And so we are all invited to give, all—to give all we have, like the widow does. In stewardship terms, when we talk about giving all we often use a trio of "t's": time, talent, and treasure. All of them are kinds of offerings: We're invited to give to God and God's work in the world in how we allot and spend our time, and in the way we share our particular abilities and skills, and with what we do with our financial resources. We're invited to give ourselves, all that we are. Money is a part of it, uncomfortable as it may make us to talk about it in church. We should talk about in church, because what we do with our money is noted by God, and can bring us closer to God.

That's how it is with the widow. What she does is close to what God does in Jesus. Now I am going to get geeky with the Greek. Literally, the scriptural text says "out of her poverty, she gave her whole life." More than a convenient story about stewardship, the widow's offering prefigures and points to Christ. He became poor, that we might know the riches of God's grace. He gave his whole life—for us, to us. He gives it, freely, no stipulations, no taking back. It is ours to give back.