Opening Sentences
Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.¹

Scripture Introduction
I’ve asked Dave Baak to extend the reading through Mark 13:2 this morning, so that you can hear the entire context of Jesus’ blessing the poor widow.

You’ll first hear Jesus’ condemnation of the scribes. (Given Jesus’ dressing down of the scribe in last week’s text, we are prepared for that.) Then he will praise the poor widow for her giving to the Temple. Then you will hear Jesus’ condemnation of the Temple, of the very institution to which the poor widow is giving her all.

Scripture Reading
38 As [Jesus] taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ³⁹ They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

⁴¹ He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³ Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴ For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” ² Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” ²

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I’ve been living inside this text for a couple of weeks. And I keep being nudged, messed with, by what Jesus does in this passage. Through all the distractions of the large characters in this story—the temple, the scribes, the disciples—Jesus draws our attention to this one poor widow and to her exceptional giving, and then he condemns the very institution that she is giving to. It’s a surprising text, and ultimately it’s also an instructive text for an institution that today is asking people to give.

¹ 2 Corinthians 8:7

Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.
Before we get to the details of the story, I want introduce a concept that was very useful to me as a college student. It is gambling—not in general. I don’t care much for gambling, except when it comes to one thing. Blaise Pascal was a mid-seventeenth-century philosopher. And Pascal’s most famous proposal was The Wager. Pascal described the human situation like this:

- Either God is, or God is not. And reason cannot decide between the two alternatives. It is not reason that can ultimately make this judgment.
- So, then, think of it as a game, where heads or tails will turn up. One or the other—God is or God is not.
- Now, you must wager. You have to bet your life. We can’t opt out; we are already in life. Either we have to live as if God existed or as if God did not. You must wager.
- Pascal then looks at what you might gain or lose in wagering that God is. In Pascal’s view, if God is and you act as if it were so, you gain everything—what he calls an infinity of infinite joys; if you lose however, you lose nothing.3
- He concludes, “Wager, then, without hesitation, that God is.”

The way Jesus describes this widow in Mark, she made the wager. She went “all in.” She bet the house. And Jesus suggests, nudges us, to be as bold a gambler as she.

I imagine this widow dwarfed by the temple where she’s walking to offer her gift; she’s swallowed up in its magnitude. She’s a small, inconspicuous widow. A camera shot from the rafters, if it noticed her at all, would show her as just a speck in a vast hall. She may be putting in her all, but she is quite small, seemingly irrelevant.

It’s not uncommon to feel small. In the two and a half million dollars that will make MissionMatters go, most of us have only a small part—just a speck. We need a lot of specks to make it add up. And as big as two and a half million dollars seems, up against the issues that we are attempting to address with this campaign, even that total seems like a speck. The widow in the temple is putting everything in, and it’s so small. And we’re putting in our specks and putting our couple million up against the massive need for early childhood education, food, and love. It all seems small. There is a word for us here.

By now, most of you know this story. In July of 1861, twenty-five Presbyterians became Westminster Presbyterian Church and called Rev. Courtney Smith to serve as their pastor. He’d been at First Presbyterian across the river. They knew him; he was a New School Presbyterian, a revivalist preacher, and most importantly, an abolitionist. The bulletin quotation from Frederick Douglass provides the context for Westminster’s choice of pastor. Douglass knew the church’s general opposition to abolition: “There is no power out of the church that could sustain slavery [even] an hour, if slavery were not sustained in the church.” Let’s be clear. For the most part, slavery was condoned and sustained in the American churches.

And so, as Christian abolitionists were rare in the mid-nineteenth century, that fact was not incidental in Westminster’s interest. It was perhaps the primary reason they called Rev. Smith.

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3 Wikipedia adds—Pascal’s Wager: He would say that there is here an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain, a chance of infinite gain against a finite number of chances of loss, and what you stake is finite. And so our proposition is of infinite force, when there is the finite to stake in a game where there are equal risks of gain and of loss, and the infinite to gain.
And as I’ve pointed out during our MissionMatters conversations, none of those first twenty-five members of Westminster were African-American; none of them were slaves. Westminster came into being for the sake of serving people who were not them. We were birthed with an outward-focused mission orientation. That’s why MissionMatters makes so much sense as our calling today. It’s in keeping with our congregational DNA.

And the issue Westminster sought to address in the mid-nineteenth century was the social and political reality of slavery. They must have felt like a speck against the tenor of their times, especially with so few Christians among the abolitionist ranks. They must have felt small—they were small. They were only twenty-five.

They were ordinary people, ordinary saints, I’d call them. Heritage Sunday, which we observe today, reminds us of our forebears’ commitments, of the commitments of the ordinary saints that started this church. Today also reminds us that we don’t just leap from the first generation to the current generation. There have been many ordinary saints in between—like our fifty-year members, whom we celebrate today, who have made the wager.

Maybe none of the work of the subsequent generations was as dramatic as the abolitionist Smith and the first congregants, but they pushed their chips to the middle of the table a few times over the years. In the 1920's Westminster was given its first opportunity to move out of downtown and said, “No, we’re staying.” Twice more the opportunity arose, and twice more the ordinary saints said, “No, we’re all in.” Porter Hills, Dwelling Place, Ferguson House—these were all the faithful wagers of ordinary saints before our current call.

Now it's up to us.

I feel very good about what we're doing today. It seems faithful to our forebears. Someone put it to me this way:

How many churches do you know who not only open their Christian camp to anyone—Christian, person of faith or not—and who provide scholarships for those “anyone’s” to come, and who even will gladly hire a gay kid to serve as a counselor at their Christian camp and treat it as a non-issue? How many churches do you know who provide NAEYC-accredited early childhood education on a sliding tuition scale to anyone who comes? We actually know that it’s less than one per cent of church-operated centers that offer scholarships and even fewer who are NAEYC-accredited. And though there may be many church-operated food pantries across the country, how many of them have the vision to move toward the Food Club and real food security. And the real question is how many congregations are doing all three?

So I feel very good about what we're doing today. We small, ordinary saints have tried very hard to make this campaign faithful to the tradition of that first generation, to make this a work for those beyond our walls, to keep making the wager, keep focused more on the needs of others than our own.

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4 National Association for the Education of Young Children.
Nevertheless, we are... well, we are an institution. We can't just glide over Jesus' institutional critique here. There are ambiguities in this and every capital campaign. We are not “selling all we have” and giving it to the poor. We are in part preserving the institution—our core missions, especially. But we have put a new roof over our heads. We are planning to keep the building standing for another hundred years. Part of this campaign is to preserve the institution.

So let's look at Mark further. There is a lot that could obscure what Jesus and Mark want us to see. The long-robed scribes, making the public scene in the market, in the synagogue, and at banquets are conspicuous, like those putting their offerings in the treasury. They're big. Easy to see. They're a bigger deal than the widow; heavens, they devour widows.

The Temple also. It's big. The disciples are totally impressed, as perhaps they were with the big givers in the temple. But Jesus sweeps the temple out of the way. Jesus says the temple will be destroyed. As the scribes will be condemned, so will this temple. Jesus doesn't praise the institution to which the widow is giving. That should give us pause.

The institution, whether the Temple or Westminster, must be alert; it must be ready to critique and renew itself regularly. Think of the church of the mid-nineteenth century against which Frederick Douglass railed—it needed a serious course of correction. We feel very good about our church today. There is a wonderful feeling in the air these days. Paul Karsten has said that it feels like the wind is at our back. But if I understand what Jesus is saying, the institution must continually critique itself, attempt to correct itself, clarify, check, and re-check our bearings.

And again I feel really good about this campaign. We put on a 100-year slate roof. It's a good message. We're here to stay. We're not leaving. We are committed to the neighborhood. We believe in restoring things, not just tearing them down. But we don't want to go from being that abolitionist church to the church with the award-winning roof. That's actually not likely to happen with this campaign, and that's why I feel good about it, because more than half of the money being raised is for WCDC, Camp Henry, and the Food Pantry.

But the institution has to maintain its alertness, keep its eye on the ball. We all want to be sure that this is a great program, that we have done our due diligence, that we are involved in a prudent, thoughtful, sober, and faithful enterprise. And so it seems. It's in keeping with our history. It's thoughtful. It's generous.

But the longer I live in this text, the more I think that's only a small part, and not the most important part, of what Jesus is trying to show us here. He surely puts the gospel screws to the institution, but there's more.

The critique of the institution, the challenge to the institution to remain faithful, is still not the center of Jesus' focus. It's the widow. Though dwarfed by the temple, though inconspicuous in comparison to the scribes, though her gift is tiny in comparison to others, and she appears as a speck, Jesus, nevertheless, puts the camera directly on her. It's as if everything else melts away, and she becomes the center of the frame. He lingers over her. He notices. What she does so inconspicuously, he places at the center.
As much as the institution’s fidelity matters—what Westminster does with what we give, Jesus focuses here on the giver, on the one putting her whole life in the offering. There are a lot of big distractions in the scene: scribes and givers and the temple itself. And Jesus focuses on her.

He says: This poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing... she out of her poverty has put in everything she had.... It seems small, he says, “but it’s more than all the others combined.” It’s more, because she makes the wager. She goes all in. Jesus turns the camera on her, because she is like him. He went all in for us. He went all in for us, for the church, an institution that might not always be faithful to him.

This widow is not betting on the success of the institution or even its faithfulness. It’s not about return on her investment. It’s not about what her gift accomplishes. Jesus puts the spotlight on her, because she goes all in.

The gospel can’t be reduced to a capital campaign pitch. I don’t know exactly how you translate the widow’s “all in” into a pledge. But I do know that it’s made me rethink mine about ten times.

I’ve been saying, “If you can go big, go big. This is what we’re called to in our generation.” I believe that. But if I understand what Jesus is saying here, he’s saying, “Go all in, but don’t do it for Westminster. Do it for you. It’s about the giver going all in.”

So we are all now going to live inside this text ourselves and bring our gifts to the “treasury.” That’s not what the gospel is about. To some of you a dollar is a very big deal, as big as the widow’s penny.

You may feel you or your gift is just so very small. If this story means anything, it is that Jesus notices. He sees. Be confident that Jesus turns his lens on you, as he does on her. He honors your sacrifice, the giving of your life. We are small, but he unequivocally says that we matter—as all the ordinary saints who’ve gone before us have.

After we pray, we’re going to invite everyone forward. The first and most important thing is to touch the waters—remember the God who went all in for us. Touch the waters to remember God’s love. Touch the waters and say again in your best trust, “I’ll make the wager. I’m all in.”

And second, when you come forward, if you have them today, bring your offering or bring your pledge for MissionMatters. They are another way to say, “I’m all in.” Make the wager.

But most importantly, when you come forward, whether you have an offering or pledge or not, come to the waters. Touch the waters. And say again, “I’m all in.”

Let us pray. Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.