

Twenty Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TEXAS
10 November 2024

Mark 12:38-44

A local United Way office realized that it had never received a donation from the town's most successful businessperson. The person in charge of contributions called the man, to persuade him to contribute: "Our research shows that out of a yearly income of at least One Million Dollars, you give not a penny to charity. Wouldn't you like to give back to the community in some way?" The businessman replied: "First, did your research also show that my mother is dying after a long illness, and has medical bills that are several times her annual income?" The United Way representative mumbled, "Um...no." The person continued: "Or that my brother, a disabled veteran, is blind and confined to a wheelchair?" The United Way worker began to stammer out an apology. The businessman interrupted her, saying: "Or that my sister's husband died in a traffic accident," his voice rising in indignation, "leaving her penniless with three children?!" The humiliated United Way person, completely beaten, said simply, "I had no idea..." On a roll, the businessman cut her off once again: "...So, if I didn't give any money to any of them, why should I give any money to you?"

Last week we talked about how at the end of chapter 10 we saw the healing of blind Bartimaeus, as Jesus is walking from Jericho to Jerusalem. At the beginning of chapter 11, Mark gives us the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, where he proceeds to cleanse the temple and to overturn the tables of the money changers, accusing them of having turned God's house into a den of robbers. Soon after this episode, on chapter 11:27 we see how the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders challenge his authority to do the things he does. They test him in several ways, trying to find reasons to arrest him. The first test has to do with his authority, the second with paying taxes to the emperor, the third deals with the resurrection, and the fourth has to do with the great commandment, according to the law of Moses.

Right after he successfully answered these questions, he is praying in the Temple, watching people putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums of money, making a great show of the sound the coins are making as they fall into the metal plates. Then a poor, beaten down, humble widow comes in and puts in two small copper coins, not even worth a penny. Jesus calls his disciples to himself and says to them, "This poor widow has put more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. They contributed out of their abundance, but she contributed all she had to live on." Jesus contrasts the humility and

obscurity of the poor woman to the wealth and arrogance of the scribes who love to walk around in long robes, to be greeted with respect by all in the marketplaces, and to have the preferential seats in synagogues and banquets. She, who is dependent on the mercy of others, gives all that she has quietly, discretely, sacrificially, feeling guilty that she doesn't have more to give.

Ironically, many of the scribes had become wealthy through the exploitation of the widows. Women were not allowed to inherit property in first century Palestine. In the cases where a rich man died, leaving all his fortune behind, the woman was not allowed to claim this money or to manage it at will. If the woman had no adult sons, a Scribe might be appointed to handle the state for the widow. Since the widows had little legal standing, many unscrupulous Scribes would take more than the 10% of returns allowed by law, and in many cases would mismanage or steal at will. There was rampant abuse of widows by these Scribes. In any case, the widow gives as much as she can, quietly and prayerfully. The Pharisees and Scribes on the other hand are more concerned with appearances. They offer loud and complicated prayers in public, so that everyone will know how holy they are, and they make a big show of putting their money on the collection plates. They thank God loudly that they are not like the unrighteous or the sinners, or the poor. They are smug, they are arrogant, and they are highly hypocritical.

Lest we believe that we are better than the Scribes, let me remind us that we tend to treat those we see as successful very differently to those we see as nobodies. This is our human tendency. We value the wrong stuff. In fact, we worry so much about money that issues related to money account for almost 50% of all divorces in this country. Many churches can also be criticized for worrying more about buildings and structures than about sharing the depth of our faith with the world. Money is important, but it is not the most important commodity in the Christian faith. When the Church does what we do best, which is to worship God with body, soul, and mind, and to bring lost and broken people to Christ, money always follows. God blesses faithful churches that reach out in love and care for the people God has given them to serve.

Now, before we get too serious about money, let me tell you another joke. "A man who needs legal help goes to a lawyer's office. After being escorted inside, he sits across the desk from the lawyer. The man needs legal help, but he wants to make sure he can afford it first. "Can you tell me how much you charge?" he asks. "Of course," the lawyer replies, "I charge \$800 to answer three questions." "Don't you think that's an awful lot of money to answer three questions?" "Yes, it is", answers the lawyer, "What's your third question?" (<https://madisoncu.com/the-25-best-money-jokes/>)

The reading from Mark today is not just really about money, but about the internal motivations of our hearts. They are about the real meaning of giving. The widow gave sacrificially, she gave what she had, she gave her life. Her giving was much more than money, her giving was also prayer and humility. She gave of herself as much as of her wealth. By doing so, she became absolutely dependent on God. The Gospel today has to do with giving, and with Stewardship. I would feel remiss if I did not speak about our own giving and Stewardship to God. It would be biblically incorrect if I asked any of you during this season of Stewardship to go into abject poverty in order to give all your wealth to the church. This is not what the Scripture is telling us today. But I do want to make a connection between our giving and our commitment to Christ and to his Church.

How a Christian chooses to handle money tells us a great deal about their character and their faith. We need to ask ourselves today if we are giving what the Church needs from us to the best of our ability, or if we are giving what's easy, and comfortable, and what doesn't require any sacrifice. There is a tendency to think that stewardship should be left to the wealthy. But stewardship is the responsibility of the entire body of Christ, and we all, no matter how poor or how wealthy, have a responsibility to do what we can and to give what we can, prayerfully, sacrificially, and in faith that Christ will bless our efforts in a mighty way. But our money is just half of the formula. The other half is our time, our witness, our desire to share our faith with those who are hungry and thirsty for the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth. That too is part of our stewardship responsibility. God wants much more than our money. God wants our total love and commitment. Money is just part of that total love and commitment. The church needs both our money and our commitment. I pray that you will make a promise today to do all you can to serve God and this community in faithfulness and love, knowing that God loves a cheerful giver.

Let us pray,

Dear God, we know that where our hearts are there our treasure is also. On this Commitment Sunday, we pray that you may help us prioritize you and the mission you have given us to do, as we plan for our church during this season of stewardship. We ask you this in Jesus name, Amen!