

“Nothing Held Back”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Mark 12: 38-44

There is a posting on Facebook which has been shared exponentially in the last week after Hurricane Sandy hit the Northeast. It reads as follows:

I give my son 55 cents every day to buy milk for his lunch. It's been brought to my attention that since Sandy, he has been drinking from the water fountain and donating his milk money to the victims. When I asked him about this, he responded by saying: "I know it's not a lot, dad, but it's all I have to give them. I don't need my milk, they can use it." The compassion of children is an unbelievable thing.

When a disaster hits, we witness incredible acts of mercy and generosity. In this case, we see a child, who seemingly has very little to give, offer whatever he can to help those in most need. We see someone thinking first of others, rather than what is in his or her best interest.

In our passage today, Jesus' condemnation of the scribes was primarily because they were extremely corrupt and did not think first of the least in their midst. They used their religious standing to get the nicest meals, the seats of honor at the table, the bows and curtsies of respect as they walked around town. They put on a show of religious piety, when in fact they were deceiving the very people they served.

I wonder if that is why Jesus notices the widow who comes to give her offering to the church. Instead of all the high priests and scribes who everyone always looks at, he instead notices this old lady, stooped over and unassuming. In front of her are the rich and wealthy, bringing large sums of money to add to the treasury. But all she bears in her hands are two copper coins, which would be like putting a few pennies in the offering plate today. "How dare he notice her and not me, as I place so much more money in the treasury! What about my good deeds? What about all the respect and honor and status I hold in the community? How dare Jesus notice her, and not me!"

Jesus addresses this reaction in the following way: "Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 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." The rich contributed out of abundance, while the poor widow gave out of her poverty. Abundance versus poverty. They gave part of what they had. She gave all that she had – namely, her life.

A friend of mine used to say that it's not what you give that matters, it's what you hang to that matters (Rev. Ed Wilson). Does that ring true for you, especially as you hear this story? Often when the end of the year comes, and we are budgeting for the next year, we first take into account our resources

and then our expenses. We see what it will cost to maintain our home, to pay for necessities such as food and clothing and medical care, and so on. We determine what we need to save aside for emergencies and future savings, and possible entertainment and recreation for us and our families. More often than not, we look first at what we are keeping, before we determine what we are going to give away to others, whether it's the church or other charities.

The widow did not have resources to review, or budgets to compare from the previous year. She didn't have to think about how to pay for the necessities of life because she lived her life without them – food, clothing, a home, were all items for which she simply scraped by each and every day. She did not first think about what she was going to hang on to, because in all honesty, she had practically nothing to keep. So instead, she came to the treasury and placed in the box what she had, and kept nothing for herself.

You can make the argument that she isn't the best example of stewardship and sacrifice because of the institution she was giving to. As we discussed earlier, the church at that time was very corrupt, and likely her money would not be used to help others who were poor, but rather to feed and clothe those arrogant scribes Jesus so fiercely condemned at the beginning. Why should we lift this poor widow up, anyway?

Barbara Brown Taylor comments that perhaps Jesus saw her in a slightly different light: "She reminded him of someone. It was the end for her; it was the end for him, too. She gave her living to a corrupt church; he was about to give his life for a corrupt world. She withheld nothing from God; neither did he. It took one to know one. When he looked at her it was like looking into a mirror at a reflection so clear that he called his disciples over to see. 'Look,' he said to those who meant to follow him. 'That is what I have been talking about. Look at her'" (*The Preaching Life*, 130-131).

That is why we give. That is why we contribute. That is why we come to the treasury box and drop in the last two coins to our name. Not because we feel guilty or proud, but because we rejoice that another has already emptied himself for our very sake. Jesus was the offering to a corrupt world, and has transformed that world into something beautiful because of his gracious act. If we're not giving to God for that reason, then we need to reexamine the real reason we all are here.

Money is idolatrous. It causes greed, want, and loss of perspective when we focus entirely on its power. Why else do you think Jesus spends so much time talking about it throughout his earthly ministry? Unfortunately, we also bring that idolatry into the church. We see the collection of the offering as an interruption of our worship service, a time when we are asked to make our charitable donation so that the earthly obligations of the church might be met.

Instead of an interruption, though, it should be seen as an integral part of worship. That is because it is the one moment when we can respond to the Word of God in a significant and positive way. It is when we say we are totally dependent on God, and give back to him what first came from him. It

is when we focus first on what we give away, and not on what we hold onto. It is when we realize that all of us are poor, no matter our material wealth, and the joy which comes from giving out of poverty is no match for giving out of abundance.

Heidi Neumark writes: *Some years ago I visited a Roman Catholic parish in one of the poorest areas of Mexico City. Mass was being held outdoors, and I arrived as people were setting up plastic chairs and wooden benches in a circle around the brightly dressed altar. The Virgin of Guadalupe smiled her approval from a mural on the side of the church as a few stray dogs settled down to nap in the warm dust.*

The liturgy followed a familiar pattern with songs, readings, a homily and the sharing of the peace. Then it was time for the offering. People got in line, many carrying what appeared to be small, plastic bags filled with a whitish substance. As the guitar band played, each person stepped forward and poured the contents of their bag into coffee cans placed on the altar. It was rice. Each person was pouring a small quantity of raw rice into cans that were soon filled to the brim. We prayed an offertory prayer and continued with the mass.

Afterward the priest explained that every day, every family takes at least one spoonful of rice and puts it aside. This does not add to anyone's hunger, he noted, but it makes a difference for those who receive one of the cans, usually someone in a home where a person has become ill or died.

The practice of setting aside spoonfuls of rice wove giving into everyone's daily routine. Your neighbors' daily bread was part of your own, something you remembered each time you cooked or even picked up a spoon. It made a difference because it was a pattern embraced by the whole community, connecting their communion around the altar to the tables in their neighbors' homes. It was one of the simplest and most powerful stewardship models I've ever witnessed (*Christian Century, October 30, 2012: <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-10/sunday-november-11-2012>*).

As we follow the poor widow to the treasury, may we see all that we have as a thank-offering to God. And in our giving, we not only honor God, but we also strengthen the Body of Christ by holding nothing back. Thanks be to God. Amen.