

2 Corinthians 9: 10-15 ~ Mark 12:38-44

*What Are You Putting In?*

November 11, 2018 ~ Stewardship Commitment Sunday

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### ***Intro to Gospel Reading***

Our Gospel reading begins at v. 38. But the verse directly before it, verse 37, sets the stage. It tells us, “And the large crowd was listening to him with delight.” Picture yourself there in that crowd in the temple in Jerusalem, amused and thrilled by Rabbi Jesus who has just posed an unsolvable riddle about King David, clearly poking fun at a saying of the scribes. You and everyone in the large crowd are loving it. How can this Rabbi Jesus come up with these one-liners that put everything you thought was fixed and settled in a new light—and set off the Temple officials? What fun is this! What will he say next?

Better stick around, that riddle seemed like just the warm up. He’s probably getting ready to say something *really* outrageous. Doesn’t he know he could be killed for talking like this?

### ***Sermon***

You may have heard the story about the plane that was up in the sky cruising along, when all of a sudden there was a jerk then a drop, because one of the engines had seized up. As the pilot was preparing to attempt an emergency landing, and as the cabin oxygen masks were popping out of their containers, in the midst of this sudden panic, a flight attendant spied a passenger wearing a clerical collar and said to him, “Quick! Father: Our plane is in trouble. Do something religious!” Immediately the priest responded, “And now let us receive the morning offering.”

As ridiculous as this sounds in the context of a potential airplane crash, the truth is that putting our morning offering in the plate is a supremely religious act. In fact, it is the most concrete religious action we take every Sunday in worship. Let’s be honest: when we sing hymns, pray prayers, or read the Bible hear the preacher preach, we may or may not be giving our full attention. (I won’t ask for a show of hands). We may or may not be seeking to reconnect with God Almighty and heal the broken parts of our lives and our world. Of all the moves we make in worship, only one is unambiguous. We either give an offering or we don’t. We either put something in the plate, (physically or electronically) or we don’t. And today we will have the chance to put our 2019 Pledge Commitment in the wooden church, or to dedicate the 2019 Pledge we have already submitted.

“Do something religious!” The word, “religion,” comes from the Latin, “*re-ligare*,” which literally means to re-connect. Yes: religion at its heart is what we do to reconnect with God. What we decide to put in as our offering reconnects us at our core to the real source of all we have and are. Yes, this is Commitment Sunday--And how

timely that our lectionary passage, our 3-year cycle of scripture texts, just happens to toss up this story this Sunday, often known as “The Widow’s Mite.” What a great soft ball text for preachers across the land to look at and say, “Oh yes, I can hit a grand slam for Jesus and our stewardship campaign with this one. Thank you, Jesus.” The widow’s sacrificial, abundant gift of two small copper coins, “all she had to live on,” offers up a beautiful, simple parable: a portrait of proportional, intentional, sacrificial giving. There’s the 3-point sermon right there. Will the ushers please come forward?

That would be the sermon, and we could call it a day right now—if we were only looking at the second panel, the “Widow’s Mite” part of our text. Don’t get me wrong: I believe in the wisdom and the power of proportional, intentional, and sacrificial giving, however that is not the *whole* message that Mark intended here. The preceding paragraph, where Jesus is ripping on the hypocrisy of the scribes, connects to his observation of and proclamation about the widow. It is really one story in two parts. Let’s dig a little deeper to see what message Mark might have for us by looking at the two panels together.

Let’s notice what catches Jesus’ *ire*, and what catches Jesus’ *eye*. In the first panel, Jesus unleashes his ire on the scribes. He criticizes them for their hypocrisy most of which is fairly easy for us to picture: walking around in long robes, being greeted with respect in the marketplaces, having the best seat in the synagogue and at banquets. No surprise here: already four times in Mark, Jesus has taught: the last shall be first, if you want to be great you must be a servant of all. But the phrase, “They devour widows’ houses,” what’s that about? First of all, as Marcus Borg has written, “throughout the Hebrew Bible, widows (along with orphans) are consistently the special objects of God’s compassion, because without a man to provide for them, they were the most vulnerable people in their society. Treatment of widows and orphans was a clear measure of the justice or injustice of the society.”<sup>i</sup>

As a literate class, scribes working for the wealthy administered loan agreements, and then foreclosed on widows’ property when the loan could not be repaid. In his violent sounding phrase, “devouring widow’s houses,” Jesus is condemning the scribes for the ultimate hypocrisy and injustice of extorting widows, the very ones they are charged to defend fiercely. Scribes will not just be condemned for extorting from widows. They will receive the *greater* condemnation. Is Jesus implying here there is one level of condemnation for straight up evil; and an even, *greater* level of condemnation for those who do evil, but disguise it as good? In any case, the point is clear: This is extremely bad behavior.

In the second panel, Jesus sits down and watches the crowd as they are putting money into the treasury. The practice he is observing is quite different from the way we receive our morning offering. No plate was passed during a Temple service. Rather each congregant would announce the amount being given to a priest and then deposit their

offering into one of thirteen shofar chests that were designed like a tuba. Apparently this was to discourage busy hands from taking out of the chest, rather than putting in.<sup>ii</sup>

What catches Jesus' eye is the contrast between the shallow display of generosity by the wealthy people, flaunting the large amounts they were announcing as they put their money into the shofar chest; and the poor widow humbly putting in her two small copper coins, or lepta, literally the least coin. He is so moved by what she has done, that he calls his disciples over, and issues a "Truly I tell you" lesson to them, "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." In the context of the full story, Jesus' comments are really a lament about the widow's victimization and actually continue his greater condemnation of the scribes, who instead of caring for this woman, instead would rob her of her last dime. But here's the punch line: She beats them to it. She exercises her agency by *choosing* to put in all that she has.

It seems to me, that what catches Jesus' eye about the extravagant, foolish, feisty gift—is the same thing that will catch Jesus' eye the next day, Wednesday, when he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper and another poor woman anointed Jesus' head with very costly ointment. Both women got it. Both women gave all they had with extravagant generosity—and flair. Two lepta in the Treasury box in front of that large crowd, a jar of ointment right on Jesus head: these sacrificial actions gave these poor women agency: They demonstrated to the rest of us a freedom, a power, the world cannot give. And Jesus took notice! Like these two women, Jesus will give his last red cent near the dump on the outskirts of town on a cross at Golgotha, leaving nothing behind.<sup>iii</sup>

My friends, stewardship at its core is not about church budgets. Stewardship is another word for agency. We have the power to make choices about how we manage our money, time, and energy— to make connections that the world resists: To reconnect and reconcile the world. The more we give, the freer we can be and the better the world will become.<sup>iv</sup>

Do we want to catch Jesus' ire? Or Jesus' eye? How many more days will more than 200 immigrant children continue to live separated by our government from their parents at the border? Last Thursday, 12 more people were killed at the "Borderline" bar in Thousand Oaks, Ca. We are horrified, and we all think, "Oh no, not again." Some survivors of the Borderline Bar shooting were also survivors of the Route91 Las Vegas shooting. It has been only two weeks since the anti-Semitic shooting in the Pittsburgh synagogue that left 11 dead. Surely these events have raised Jesus' ire.

What is catching Jesus' eye? I hear Jesus asking us: *What are we putting in to reverse, to stop, to uncover the root sources of what's become a steady drum beat of*

hate, violence, death? “Sacrifice can throw us off balance, yet there is something deeply human about it,” wrote Brad Roth.<sup>v</sup> Yes, something deeply religious. The greater the gift, the greater the freedom to reshape our lives, our church, and our world to God’s will. What are we putting in?

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<sup>i</sup> Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’s Final Days in Jerusalem*, (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 2006), 74.

<sup>ii</sup> Brian K. Blount & Gary W. Charles, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 202.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid*, 203.

<sup>iv</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Inscribing the Text*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 75 (ideas from this page are contained in this paragraph).

<sup>v</sup> Brad Roth, “Living by The Word,” *Christian Century*, October 24, 2018, 20.