

1 John 3:16-25 ~ Mark 12:38-44

(STEWARDSHIP SERIES, 3rd of 3)

Great is Thy Faithfulness: Do Something Beautiful for God

26TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, STEWARDSHIP PLEDGE DEDICATION SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2024

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Note: *Final full paragraph in this published edition was inadvertently skipped by the preacher while she was dropping those two coins in the little can again and again.*

There he goes again. Noticing the unnoticed. Seeing the unseen:

Then turning things upside down.

Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain made low:

Like bringing down the high up self-important clergy types;

then raising up one poor, invisible, unnamed, widow.

And this time, his teaching was unprompted, unprovoked.

At least not by anything anyone said:

No one was asking him a question. No one was testing him.

In fact, he was crushing it. Mark tells us, right before this, tirade/teaching

“the large crowd was listening to him with delight.” (v.37)

So he takes this moment in the temple to riff on the poison of hypocrisy and greed.

And then he sat down, took a breath and watched

the swirl of the crowd around him. Perhaps he was taking stock.

He knew this was the last time he would ever be there in the Temple.

And this would be his last teaching within this sacred space. This holy of holies.

In the line he sees a poor, old, widow. Invisible to most.

A bother to others. But not to Jesus.

His eyes open wide. To him she is a model, the one to watch:

This poor widow from among the least of these. And her two coins.

Did he say that her offering of two copper coins was *more than* any of the others?

We do marvel at how you can make the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear.

But...a dollar's a dollar, right? And in her case, it wasn't even a dollar or a denarius

but just 2 Lepta: The smallest copper coins in circulation.

2 copper coins. *Clink, Clink.*

How embarrassing. Why did she even bother?

Loose offering we'd call it. Such a bother to count it, really.

What could they possibly add up to?

What good could 2 lepta possibly accomplish, anyway?

They wouldn't repair the leaky Temple roof. Or replace one of our heat pumps.

Nor would they be enough to feed a hungry child.

Such a foolish woman, a senseless widow.

After all, doesn't she need those coins more than the Temple does?

The Temple is supposed to be providing for widows, orphans, and the aliens.

Not the other way around.

Better not let Jesus be the Chair of the Stewardship & Finance Committee, if you hope to make your church budget.

So why is Jesus making such a big to-do over her 2 small coins? *Clink, Clink*. He deliberately called the disciples over to hear what he had to say about her. A teaching moment, signaled twice: by his sitting down and the words, "Truly, I tell you." Which means look up from your smartphone, and listen, I am about to say something really important. What was it this time? Look at this woman putting love into action, by giving all she had to live on. A woman acting on the greatest commandment in stark contrast to the religious leaders in their robes, with their power and prestige getting in the way of God's clear command: "You shall love the Lord your God with ALL your heart; with ALL your soul; and with ALL your mind, and with ALL your strength. *What part of ALL don't we understand?*"

Jesus knew he was about to give his all on the cross just four days later. Perhaps he felt a kinship with this woman who was giving her all that very day. But her "all" was a humble, simple, yet for her extravagant gift: her last 2 copper coins. *Clink, Clink*. Only a few days left here for Jesus. So much sin. So little time. So much confusion about poverty and wealth and what it is we actually live on.

What about us here today in Marshfield, about 2,000 years later. You in the pews, me standing here, (yes in my long robe) on Pledge Dedication Sunday. What can we learn from this ancient story on this one and only November 17, 2024, we will ever get to live? In her offering we are given a picture and a sound that teaches us 3 points, that help us understanding practically how to be good stewards, according to Jesus.

1st point: **IT'S ABOUT YOUR MORE:** Jesus was not looking at the face value, but the heart value, what comes from inside of us. Our spiritual need to give in proportion to what we have received. Nor was Jesus criticizing rich people or their gifts here. This point has to do with proportional giving. The value of the gift in Jesus' eyes is *entirely* proportional. And only God and you know what "your more" truly is. You know it in your gut. If you are still wondering, "what is *my* more, that God is calling me to give, *Pray the question*: What is *my* more? Given my income, what shall I return to God for God's work in this world. For the poor widow, it was two copper coins, [clink, clink]. What is it for you?

2nd point: **IT'S ABOUT PUSHING BACK.** This poor widow chose to push back. She refused to accept her status as a victim passively. Instead, she leveraged her agency against the corrupt system within which she was living. With her 2 coins, [*clink, clink*] she was saying "yes" to God and "no" to all who made a show of religion, abusing funds for their own gain. Here in our day, I believe God is calling us to push back. A pledge to push back against all that is unjust, all that is wrong and broken in our world.

As individuals our pledge can be a push back, upriver against the current of our consumer culture dedicated to the amassing of goods. And choose instead to get only the things we need.

Let enough, be enough. God is calling us to be good stewards by **pushing back** and refusing to get caught up in our culture's ongoing wild competition to have the latest, the best, the biggest assets. As Sister Joan Chittister, in her chapter on stewardship points out the challenge: "The problem is that a commitment to stewardship makes every request a decision: Do I really need this thing, or do I simply want it? It confronts us with the difference between the cultural question "Don't I deserve to keep up with the technology, the style, the convenience?" And the moral question of what is being destroyed, denied to someone else if I join this pandemic of things. What is accumulation without cause doing to the breadth and quality of my own soul?"ⁱⁱ

If we push back against this "pandemic of things" we can do our part to contribute the good of the whole. Or you could think of it as "for the good of the herd." I only learned about "Herd health" from the story of our dearly departed Doctor of Veterinary Medicine, Darrel Johnson's, professional legacy. He pioneered the practice of "Herd Health" here in Wisconsin. It is an approach that treats sick cows not only as individuals but looking out for the health of the whole herd. Drawing on this medical metaphor, Doc. Johnson is helping me here today: Consider your pledge toward "Herd Health." **YOUR MORE** as a shot of redemption, an inoculation against the pandemic of hunger and injustice.

3rd point: **IT'S ABOUT BEING FAITH FORWARD.** And friends, being "faith forward" is an adventure. As well many of you are already aware. Being faith forward is taking a position on Team God which is an extreme team sport. Is your life getting dull, predictable, too routine? Try living on the wild side: Live on trust. Our money, ironically, says, "In God We trust." But do we? Really? We know there is nothing secure about securities. The higher the risk, the higher return, isn't the law of financial investing? Oddly, that *is* where following Christ and the stock market do align. Here's the truth: In Christ's portfolio, a financial gift to God that does not *reorganize* your life and make you step out on faith is hardly a gift at all. We all know that life is full of risk. Honestly, we have no idea what the future, or even tomorrow holds. But *we do know* who holds us, we do know who gave his all for us. We do know who is with us every sunrise and in our darkest hours. And it is that One who calls us to walk by faith, not by sight.

Here are the 3 points all together I hope you will take away from this sermon: **It's about your more; it's about pushing back; and it's about being faith forward.** From this little four verse story Jesus delivered a high impact message that day in the Temple to the delighted crowd of people who would soon betray and abandon him. Little did they know what was about to go down that Friday. 40 years later, when this gospel was written, around 70 CE, the Jerusalem Temple had been destroyed. Torn down by the Romans squashing the Jewish Revolt (66-73 CE). For the very first hearers of this Gospel, the fall of the Temple was an existential crisis facing the early church. In fact, the impetus for Mark's *whole gospel* was to proclaim what was the good news for the church in the shadow of the destruction of the temple. Here today, the church as we know it is changing and God is calling us into the new thing that we must be and do, here and now. Being instruments of God's peace, justice, and joy, however the church must change, is more urgent than ever.

As much as we resist the word and the idea of change, here's the truth: Your gift to the church changes you and this world for the better. As Roxie said to kick off our 2025 annual giving campaign in her Minute for Stewardship back on October 27, Today, is when we *get* to make our pledge!! In a few moments, you will *get* to bring your 2025 pledge forward. This card that signifies your more, your pushback, your faith forward decision to trust God, and seek first the kingdom of God's love and grace for all people and all creation. Your pledge is Your part to help us be Christ's hands and feet here in Marshfield, and around the world. Whatever the amount, the value of *your more*, according to Jesus is priceless.

Why is it so crucial that we put our love into action? That's how Jesus taught us and showed us how to live. God has entrusted us to do our part to bringing God's dream for the world into reality right here. As Mother Teresa has said, "*What you do, I cannot do. What I do, you cannot do. But together, you and I can do something beautiful for God.*" And I stand as a witness today to the beautiful work for God we have done, are doing, and will do together right here at FPC: From weekly worship greeters to wheelchairs loans, from rainbow polls to the ringing of our handbell choir; from supporting Soup or Socks to our spectacularly successful solar panel campaign; from hosting the Mexican Mobile Consulate to the marvelous hosting funeral lunches for grieving families and friends. These are only a very *few* examples that God is eager to amplify and multiply. Watching us as we pledge, giving our more, in the way that *only you* can do. Together, let's do something beautiful for God.

Let us make it count as much as those two small copper coins a poor widow gave one day in the Temple. *Clink, Clink.*

¹ Joan Chittister, *The Monastic Heart: 50 Simple Practices for a Contemplative and Fulfilling Life*, (Convergent: New York, NY, 2021), pp.217-218.