



“Whole-Hearted Love”
Scripture – Mark 12:38-44
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, November 11, 2018

Why does this poor widow give to the treasury?

She is clearly destitute, as the widows of Scripture so often are. Like her female forebears — whose stories are told in the pages of Ruth and the annals of the prophets — *this* widow has run out of resources. In Jesus’ estimation, the two meager coins she drops into the temple treasury are “all she had to live on.” Her cupboard is bare; her change purse is empty. She has nothing left.

It seems this was an all-too-common fate for women in the ancient world. Which is no surprise, really. In these patriarchal cultures, women were dependent on husbands and fathers for *everything* — from food to shelter, from security to social standing. The death of the man-of-the-house was devastating ... and not just because those left behind would miss his “Dad Jokes.”

So the widows we meet in Scripture are usually destitute, since they’ve lost loved ones and livelihoods in one fell swoop. This is why the Widow of Zarephath¹ is gathering sticks for what she knows will be her last meal when the Prophet Elijah stumbles upon this pitiful scene. And this is why the mother-daughter team of Naomi and Ruth scour the fields for gleanings of grain after their husbands pass from this world.² And this is why the widow Jesus meets as she prepares to bury her son is not only grief-stricken, but devastated.³

There’s a reason the command to care for widows and orphans echoes throughout the Old and New Testaments like a refrain. It’s not easy for the widows of Scripture.

But, still, *this* widow gives. The nameless woman whom Jesus sees dropping copper coins into the coffer should be on the receiving end. She should be receiving the compassion and care of her community, now that she has no one else to provide for her. And yet, she gives all that she has to live on.

Why does she do it?

¹ See 1 Kings 17:8-16.

² See Ruth 2:1-7.

³ See Luke 7:11-17.

This gift was not expected of her. According to the custom of ancient Israel, the “poor” were not required to make such offerings.⁴ So she was under no obligation to stop as she passed by the temple treasury.

And, oh, how she needed those coins! They weren’t much. Pittance, really. But she could have used the little she did have to buy a loaf of bread — something for when the gnawing hunger in her belly grew too big to ignore ... Or she could have held on to her money — kept it in her pocket, knowing the little bit of security it afforded her was worth more than anything two copper coins could buy.

But, she doesn’t hold on to it. She gives it away. Plink, plunk — into the temple treasury.

Why? Why does she offer everything she has?

Perhaps she makes her gift as a gesture of love. I know — it’s a shocking suggestion coming from the pulpit. But — I think — only love can motivate such an act of generosity ... or foolishness. Maybe foolish generosity. Only love can lead a penniless widow to offer up all she has to live on to the One who gives her life, to the God whom the faithful are called to love with heart, soul, and might.

If we go back a few verses in Mark’s Gospel, we hear this reminder from the lips of Jesus. A scribe questions him: “Which commandment is the first of all?” And Jesus responds — “The first is this: ‘... You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ And the second: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” Unlike most of the religious leaders Jesus encounters in Mark’s Gospel, this scribe ‘gets it.’ “Yes!” he says, “To love in this way is so much more important than our traditional offerings and sacrifices.” Seeing the scribe’s understanding, Jesus sends him away with a blessing: “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

I do not think it is an accident that the next action Mark records is that of a poor widow dropping two insignificant coins into the treasury. If not for Jesus’ watchful eye, her gift would have gone unnoticed. *She* would have gone unnoticed — lost amidst the pageantry of wealthy passersby plopping their contributions into the coffers. But Jesus directs our attention to her, and dignifies her offering: “Truly I tell you,” he says, “this poor widow has put in more than all the others.”

Now the temple’s Finance Committee might disagree with Jesus on this one. But then this preacher is not in the business of balancing budgets. His concern is to teach the world how to live with, and for, God and neighbor — and that includes living generously. More than generously — living sacrificially. This is how the widow differs from the religious establishment and the self-righteous elite (who — in Jesus’ day — are often one-in-the-same).

At the beginning of today’s passage, Jesus rails against the temple leaders; he rebukes their garish displays of piety, which build up their egos but tear away at the kingdom of God. “They will receive the greater condemnation!” Jesus says. And, with this reproach still ringing in our ears, we watch — and hear — the wealthy donors fill up the temple treasury. Like the ringing that punctuates a slot machine pay out, their coins pour into the coffers — clattering and clanging, and echoing across the courtyard. The ears of the temple crowd perk up; eyes fix on the treasury. And — all of a sudden — the focus shifts: those gathered are watching the wealthy, rather than attending to their own prayers. After making their gift — the rich walk away, standing a little taller. And everyone else shrinks, for they know their offerings do not amount to much in comparison.

Were the wealthy donors generous? Yes! Were their offerings needed? Absolutely! But did they give to the treasury as an expression of love or to make a show of their piety? It would be hard to say from where we sit, but Jesus doesn’t seem impressed.

⁴ Emerson Powery, “Commentary on Mark 12:38-44,” www.workingpreacher.org.

Instead, he points out a more humble gift. The destitute widow, with her two copper coins, gives the last of her worldly resources to the Lord. “Truly I tell you,” Jesus says, “this poor widow has put in more than all the others. For she has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

You shall love the Lord your God with *all* that you are and *all* that you have; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. And — in doing so — you shall draw near to the kingdom of God.

Years ago, when I was preparing for my year of service with the Presbyterian Church, I had the uncomfortable task of asking for money. Every volunteer was required to raise a portion of the funds needed to underwrite the expenses of the program. So, at twenty-two years old, I set out to raise ten thousand dollars — a daunting sum for someone whose fundraising experience was limited to wrapping paper sales and car washes.

I started by sending a letter to all the churches in my home Presbytery, which spans the St. Louis metro area and stretches southward to include rural communities downstate. Every congregation received a request to partner with me in this ministry. A number of churches responded — offering their prayers, pledging their financial contributions. I was overwhelmed by the outpouring of generosity, and filled with gratitude for the support I had received.

But there was one gift in particular that floored me. It came from a congregation on the outskirts of the Presbytery with whom I had no personal connection. I knew nothing about this church, except that they were barely scraping by. They had a small congregation and a smaller budget. They couldn’t even afford a pastor. But, still, they responded to my request.

A letter came with their fifty dollar check. It explained how excited they were to support a young person from their Presbytery, and to participate in the ministry of the wider church. It described how this gift was a way for a little congregation in rural Missouri to invest in mission, to be part of what God was doing in and for the world. There was so much faith and hope and love written into that fifty dollar check.

Yes, there were others — both churches and individuals — that gave larger sums. There were other donations that took me much closer to my fundraising goal. But now — ten years later — that fifty dollar check is the gift I most remember. Not for its size. But for the sentiment it carried. Because the congregation that offered it gave from their meager resources as an expression of deep, abiding, whole-hearted love. That sacrificial gift demonstrated love for God that flowed from compassionate souls and committed minds. It demonstrated love for neighbors the congregation had never met — not only me, but those I would serve alongside during my volunteer year. And it demonstrated hope ... Hope for the world they longed to participate in — where a young volunteer and the community she served might experience a taste of the kingdom of God.

You shall love the Lord your God with *all* that you are and *all* that you have; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. And you might realize that the kingdom of God is closer than you think.

I wonder what world the poor widow envisioned when she dropped her last two copper coins into the temple treasury. I wonder what hopes she held close as she opened her hand and released everything she had to live on. I imagine those coins carried her longing for a world in which the community does, in fact, care for widows and orphans — just as Scripture commands.

I imagine those coins carried her desire for a world in which generosity leads to mutuality within communities where wealth does not divide or diminish, and mutuality leads to relationship between unlikely strangers, and relationship leads to love that binds the world together.

I imagine those coins carried her trust that the neighbors whom she cared for with the last of her meager resources would care for her in return ... and her faith that the God whom she loved with heart, soul, mind, and strength loved her in exactly the same way.

I imagine her offering carried hope that the kingdom of God was, indeed, at hand — evident in deeds of generosity and gestures of grace.

What is the world you envision? What is the world you long to experience? What is the world you would give yourself to — heart, soul, mind, and strength?

Let us give of ourselves — wholeheartedly — as an expression of love for God and neighbor. And we just might discover God is creating the kingdom in our midst ... a kingdom shaped and sustained by love.

Prayers of the People – Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of the manger — our Emmanuel — you have entered into our world to dwell with us in sorrow and in joy. God of the empty tomb — our Resurrected Lord — you have shattered the power of death, and turned our mourning into dancing. Still, you weep with us, even as you promise to wipe away every tear from our eyes.

We take comfort in your presence among us ... in your willingness to share our pain, even as you work to transform our suffering. So we turn to you now, seeking the peace that you alone can bring.

God With Us — As we reflect upon the last few weeks, our hearts grow heavy with grief. We lament the violence we have witnessed in Pittsburgh where people of faith met for worship; in Tallahassee, where women met for yoga; in Thousand Oaks, California, where friends met for fellowship and fun; in places across the country that are quickly forgotten when another tragedy strikes. We grieve, O God, with the families, with the survivors, with the first responders, and we pray that you would bring them some measure of comfort and peace. And we grieve with and for our nation, as we grapple with the violence that plagues our common life and robs us of our sense of security. Take our grief, we pray, and transform it into righteous anger, boundless compassion, and fierce hope, that we might be instruments of your healing, here and now.

While the eyes of our nation are focused on these sites of horror, we remember that there are many people in many lands who know the scourge of violence. We pray for communities near and far that are marred by conflict and marked by suffering, and we long for the day when all will beat their swords into plowshares. We know too well that the cost of conflict is great, and we remember those who have given so generously of their skill, their time, their energy — even their lives — in service to this country. On this Veterans' Day, we give thanks for the dedication and courage of those who have served in our armed forces, and we pray that we will show our gratitude by caring for those who have sacrificed much.

Loving God — In this world of violence, we recognize that our prayers are not enough. They are merely a starting point — a way of naming all that is amiss, all that mars your vision of *Shalom*. As we pray, “Thy kingdom come,” align our wills with your will, and empower us to build your kingdom in our midst, so that all creation may share in the joy of your promised peace. Give us the grace to love with heart, soul, mind, and strength, so that our words and our deeds might glorify you.

We lift this prayer in the name of your Son, and join our voices as one to offer the words he taught us: **Our Father...**