

GIVE SHEMAfully!

Sermon, November 11, 2018

Texts: I Chronicles 29:10-18; Mark 12:38-44

If you weren't here last week, you might have thought there was a typo in the sermon title, but there isn't ... the "e" and the "a" are in the correct order.¹ Last week we looked at the previous verses in Mark 12 when the question put to Jesus, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" The first part of Jesus answer was what every Jew of His day knew to be the most important command; "Shema Yisra'el! Adonai elohenu, Adonai echad." "Hear O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one ... and you shall love the Lord your God with all your soul and with all of your mind and with all of your strength." Jewish families for millennia recited these words in their homes every day; it's called the "Shema." Then Jesus added, "The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself." And I asked a bit rhetorically, "What do these commands require us to do?" On the face of it, they don't require us to "do" anything! On the other hand, if taken seriously, well, these commands affect *everything* we do. When we genuinely love someone, we want to do whatever we can to please the beloved. Our prevailing attitude is not that we HAVE to do things, but that we GET to do things to make the beloved happy. We want to live "shema-ful" lives ... not shameful lives. In fact, I'm convinced we best avoid living shameful lives by living shema-full lives that seek to be attentive to and actively living for the God we love each and every moment with everything we have and with all our physical and mental and moral and material strength! And this includes, among other things, the generous, wise and compassionate use of the resources entrusted to our care ... because people who are in love, love to give.

In today's Gospel reading today, we read of a faithful widow (*we also read a few verses previous to that story, but that part of the sermon wound up on the editing room floor!*). We don't know much about her, but we can surmise a few things. Even though death has obviously disrupted her life and snatched her husband away, where do we find her? We find her in the temple, the house of worship, faithfully supporting its ministry. This story is traditionally known as "The Widow's Mite;" the two small copper coins she puts into the offering box are called "mites" in the King James Version, hence the traditional subtitle "*The Widow's Mite*." But this short story also tells us something about this widow's **m-i-g-h-t**; about what keeps her going in the face of loss and loneliness ... and that is her deep and abiding faith exemplified by her giving. Hers is a giving measured not so much by how much she gave, but by the proportion of what she gave. What is commendable is that this poor widow obviously gave her offering out of love for God and with faith in God to supply her needs, for she gave all she had to give. That's *shemaful* giving.

The context is that Jesus had sat down in one of the places where people would sit down and rest and watch other people. We know He'd been on his feet for some time, engaging in dialogue with the religious leaders, so like a tired guy at the mall, He sits down ... and He sits in a place where it is easy to watch people as they go about their business in that location. Historians tell us in the temple precincts in the area where Jesus sat there were thirteen offering boxes, each with brass receptacles shaped like trumpets; in fact, they were called The Trumpets.² Into these trumpets people put their offerings which would rattle and clang their way into the thirteen boxes, each for a designated cause. It was relatively possible to discern what people were giving by the sound the offering made as it was tinkling and clanging and rattling down through the Trumpets. There was no paper money, there were no checks, no online giving, no pledge cards ... you would bring your metal coins for offering and literally let it ring, as it made its noisy way down the metal trumpet and down into the chest. So one could sit and watch and **hear** people give. We're told many rich people threw in large amounts, really "sounding the trumpets" as they donated to the Temple coffers. (*By the way, this gives a bit of a perspective on Jesus' words about hypocrites and their "showy" giving in Matthew 6:2 – they weren't giving their offering to the accompaniment of a brass band, but we can imagine they were allowing their offerings to "clang" a little louder than necessary as they loudly dropped their gifts into the Trumpets to make a show of their giving!*).

Just as a bit of an aside, note that Jesus is not condemning the giving of these well-to-do people. There is no condemnation in giving large sums; in fact, all of us have occasion to be thankful for rich people throwing large amounts into the offering (*especially when we have a new church roof to pay for!*). Jesus isn't saying He doesn't approve of rich people giving large sums. But what He is about to do, as He has done on several other occasions, is to challenge common wisdom, the all-too-human evaluation that a small contribution from someone like this poor widow is borderline irrelevant or inconsequential. From a human perspective the substantial gift (and giver) is important; the "important" people are the big donors who literally sound the trumpets the loudest ... and those who don't give much; well, they don't "count" as much. But God looks on the heart; He knows who the "real" givers are. I'm sure this lady's contribution hardly made any noise at all going down. You can imagine playing a game with your friends and saying to one another as someone approaches wearing Armani sandals and perhaps a designer

¹ See <https://greenwoodchurch.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/live-shemafully.pdf>

² See https://www.bible-history.com/court-of-women/the_temple_treasury.html
and <https://www.ritmeyer.com/2015/05/15/the-treasury-of-the-temple-in-jerusalem>

robe reaching into his/her Louis Vitton handbag, "Watch! I think this is going to make a big noise. Listen! Wait for it!" And then the **KACHUNG-rattle-ring-dingaling** cacophony as the donation makes its way down the Trumpet. By contrast, two small coins would barely make a sound! So those sitting there with Jesus could hear the clanging and ringing and rattling deposits of the wealthy giving much, and they could hear the faint "dink-dink" of the widow's offering. And precisely at that point Jesus calls His disciples to Him and says, "**Amen lego!**" which means "*Truly, I say to you ...*." As mentioned during my "I'm In" sermon a few weeks back,³ rather than using the word "Amen" as a response, some fifty times in the Gospels Jesus precedes what He says with "Amen." "*Amen, I say to you ...*" Our modern Bibles usually translate this as "truly;" or "I tell you the truth." the connotation is that when preceding a statement with "Amen," Jesus is asserting: "*Get this! This is really important! What I am about to say is really and unambiguously TRUE. This is how it is!*"

So, "God is good." "ALL THE TIME." "All the time." "GOD IS GOOD." "**Amen?**" "I'M IN!"

And Jesus is saying, "*I'm in with this! Get this! Amen lego! This poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others.*" Jesus says this lady has put in more than all the cumulative offering that the others have brought here so far. How can this possibly be? Doubting Thomas probably is thinking, "*What she do, throw diamonds down there?*" Can two cents in any sense be worth more than, say, two thousand shekels? On the audible scale, her contribution barely registered! How can this lady be putting in more than all those others who gave much? Jesus' answer is clear. He's teaching them that the rich gave what they would never miss, while this widow gave sacrificially. Three quick points: 1. Genuine giving is measured by proportion, not by quantity. 2. Genuine giving is measured by the degree of sacrifice, not by the amount, and 3. Our giving is always in the sight of the Lord Jesus.

One sermon I heard on this used the story of the pig and the chicken. The chicken said to the pig, "*Lets start a business together.*" The pig replied, "*What kind of business?*" The chicken answered, "*A breakfast restaurant! We could serve bacon and eggs.*" The pig said "*Not so fast. For you, that would be a donation. For me that would be a sacrifice!*" Just a bit of a clarification ... I don't think Jesus is calling us to sacrifice everything we have, to throw all our bank accounts, 401ks, pensions and endowments into the offering plate. That isn't wise stewardship of the resources entrusted to our care; besides, it would make you destitute and cause you to become a burden to others! I've read a lot of commentaries and heard a lot of sermons over the years, and probably the best explanation I've heard on this was that as a widow, she has most likely apportioned out how much she has to eke out her existence on a daily basis,. She has a purse and in her purse she has what is needed to sustain her life for that day or that week. This wasn't her Starbuck's grande double-latte cappuccino money, this was her *grocery* money. She goes in her purse and takes out that which will sustain her life for the day and sacrificially puts it in the Trumpet. Thereby saying, "*I really want to give, I really want to support the ministry of this Temple, I want to express my gratitude to you, O God, through my giving. And I'm trusting you, God, for my daily bread ... the provision of this day.*" Will she fast that day? Will she be provided for by someone else? Who knows? But we know she is absolutely committed, she is "all in," and she gives all she has to give.

A few assumptions I think we are warranted to make: (1) We may assume the widow was in the temple in the first place because she had not abandoned her faith; her loss of her husband did not drive her away from God, but apparently all the more drove her to devotion to God. (2) We may assume her faith in God helped see her through the valley of the shadow of death, as well as many other difficulties in her life that would be the lot of a widow in that day. (3) We may even assume the widow stood at the temple treasury because she was *grateful* to this God who stood by her in good times and bad, and in her gratitude wanted to give whatever she could give. Her giving was a response, a free and thankful response, to the Lord who had sustained her throughout her difficulties ... and she wasn't about to abandon her faith as a response to hard times. Again, the widow is to be admired for the measure of her generosity; she held nothing back. And (4) we may also correctly assume God used that widow's m-i-t-e and her m-i-g-h-t to inspire and bless. God can multiply the effectiveness of even the smallest of gifts given in good faith, and Jesus used the example of the might-y faith and generous character of this woman exemplified in her giving to touch and bless and inspire the lives of many ... including us who read this story today two thousand years later ... and to teach us something about selfless, gracious, **shemaful** giving .

(This next excerpt was edited out for time constraints during the second service; I include it here): I'd like to quote from John Calvin's commentary on this passage "In two ways this teaching is useful: For the poor, who appear not to have the power of doing good, are encouraged by our Lord not to hesitate to express their affections cheerfully out of their slender means; for if they consecrate themselves, their offering, which appears to be mean and worthless, will not be less valuable than if they had presented all the treasures of Croesus. And those who possess greater abundance ... are reminded that it is not enough if in the amount of their beneficence they greatly surpass the poor and common people; because it is of less value in the sight of God that a rich man, out of a vast heap, should bestow a moderate sum, than a poor man, by giving very little, should exhaust his store." (end of excerpt)

May the same Jesus Christ Who gave His all, and may the same Jesus Christ Who commended this widow as He observed her make her faithful offering ... may this same Jesus Christ observe each of us and be pleased with us as we give AND live *shemafully* out of love for God and out of gratitude for all He has given us.

³ See <https://greenwoodchurch.files.wordpress.com/2018/08/when-amen-is-translated.pdf>