

THE WIDOW'S MITES

Sermon, November 7, 2021

Text: Mark 12:41-44

Last week we read as part of the lectionary texts the previous verses in Mark 12, where this question was put to Jesus, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" But I only referred to that text somewhat tangentially during the sermon. 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."

Now, what do these commands require us to "do?" On the one hand, 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. (By the way, technically speaking, these two commandments aren't literally a part of the Ten Commandments, but they may be seen as sort of subheadings for what's called the Two Tables of the Law: **FIRST TABLE: HOW DO WE SHOW OUR LOVE FOR GOD?** Well, Commandment 1. Worship God alone, 2. Don't worship images or idols, 3. Don't misuse His holy name, 4. Honor the Sabbath; keep it holy. **SECOND TABLE: HOW DO WE SHOW WE LOVE OUR NEIGHBOR?** 5. Starting right at home, honor your father and mother. 6. Don't murder. 7. Don't commit adultery (or, be faithful to your marital commitments). 8. Don't steal from your neighbor. 9. Don't lie, or bear false witness, to your neighbor and 10. Don't covet your neighbor's spouse, goods or property.) Our prevailing attitude is not that we HAVE to do things, but that we GET to do things to make the Beloved happy. As said in another sermon five or six years ago, we want to live "Shema-ful" lives ... not *shameful* lives. In fact, I'm convinced we best avoid living *shameful* lives by living *shema-ful* lives that seek to be 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 and spiritual strength! And this includes, among other things, the generous, wise and compassionate use of the resources He has entrusted to our care ... and people who are in love, love to give of those resources entrusted to our care.

In the Gospel reading today, we read of a faithful widow. 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 Mites;" the mites she puts into the offering are two small copper coins which made a "quadrans", worth 1/64th of a denarius, in case you were wondering (*a denarius was a typical day's wage for a skilled professional*). But this short story also tells us something about this widow's **m-i-g-h-t**; about the strength and might that keeps her going in the face of loss and loneliness ... and that is her deep and abiding faith exemplified by her shema-ful 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 went 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 formally called The Trumpets.¹ Into these trumpets people put their offerings which would rattle and clang their way into the thirteen boxes, each box for a designated cause. It was relatively possible to tell 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, no checks, no online giving, no pledge cards, no leaving your donation in a plate by the door ... you would bring your metal coins and literally let your offering 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 in the church have occasion to be thankful for well-off people throwing large amounts into the offering. No, Jesus isn't saying He disapproves of rich people giving large sums. But what He is about to do, as He has done on 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

¹ See https://www.bible-history.com/court-of-women/the_temple_treasury.html
and <https://www.rim Meyer.com/2015/05/15/the-treasury-of-the-temple-in-jerusalem>

or inconsequential as compared to the “real” offerings of the well-to-do. From a human perspective the substantial gift (and giver) seems important; so pay special attention to the “important” people who 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 might imagine the **KACHUNG-rattle-ring-ding** cacophony as the bigger donations make their way down the Trumpets. By contrast, two small coins would barely make a sound!

Those sitting there with Jesus could easily hear the cacophonous clanging and ringing and rattling deposits of the wealthy giving much, and they could barely hear the faint “dink-dink” of the widow’s offering. Precisely at that point Jesus calls His disciples to Him and says, *“Amen lego!”* which means *“Truly, I say to you ...”* (or, *“Assuredly I say to you”* in today’s version). You may remember that 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 ...”*² Bibles usually translate this as *“truly;”* or *“I tell you the truth,”* or *“assuredly;”* the connotation is that when precedes a statement with *“Amen,”* Jesus is saying: *“Get this! This is really important! What I am about to say is really and unambiguously TRUE. This is how it is!”*

Remember: “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?”* On the audible scale, her contribution barely registered! How can this lady be putting in more than all those others who really made those Trumpets sound? Jesus’ teaching them that sure, the rich gave and what they gave is helpful, but they gave what they might never miss, while this widow gave much more sacrificially. Just as an aside: Our giving is always in the sight of the Lord Jesus.

One sermon illustration I heard on this text 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!”* Now, just a bit of a clarification ... I don’t think Jesus is calling us to sacrifice everything we have, ALL we have to live on, to throw all our paychecks, 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 was that as a widow, she had most likely apportioned how much she had to eke out her existence on a daily basis. She had a purse and in her purse she put what was needed to sustain her life for that day. This wasn’t her Starbuck’s grande double-latte cappuccino money, this was her *grocery* money. She goes in her purse and takes out all that is in there, that which will sustain her life for the day, all she had to live on for that day, and sacrificially and lovingly puts it in the Trumpet. Thereby saying, *“I really want to give, I want to support the ministry of this Temple, I want to express my gratitude to You, O God, through my sacrificial giving. 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 generously gives all she has.

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 generous 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 we may also 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 gives given in good faith, and Jesus used the example of the might-y faith of this woman exemplified in her giving to bless and inspire the lives of many ... including us who read this story over two thousand years later ... and to teach us something about selfless, gracious, **shema-ful** giving.

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

² See <https://greenwoodchurch.files.wordpress.com/2021/08/were-in-your-corner-2.pdf>