

November 8, 2009

Scripture: Mark 12: 38-44

Sermon: "Two Small Copper Coins"

We are all pretty familiar with this text. We have heard this text used as part of stewardship campaigns. We have heard this text used when giving is falling behind the church budget. And I bet we all thought that is what we were going to hear again today. Well, I'm here to tell you that I am not here to preach a stewardship campaign sermon or to ask you to give more, probably much to the Finance committee's chagrin.

What I am inviting us all to do today is to hear again the story of the widow's mite anew and to really see what is going on in the text. In our text today, we find Jesus sitting with his disciples and they are people watching. They are watching people come into the Temple where the treasury is and they watch them give their offering. They see people make grand displays when they give their offering and they watch people quickly toss their coins into the treasury. Jesus and the disciples are people watching. All morning this group has been people watching and like any good teacher, Jesus uses their observations as a teaching moment.

And so he turns to them and says, "Now, you've been watching the scribes, the leaders of the church coming in and giving their offerings. You've seen them in their fancy robes. You've heard them teaching about the law and what God wants from God's people. All morning, you've heard their long prayers. And all morning, you've watched them forget the greatest commandment. You've seen how they take advantage of the widows by taking all their money and their houses just so the scribes can have riches. Sure they claim it is for the Temple but really do you think God wants the church to take people's last two coins just so the offering is paid, just so the sacrifice to God is made? Disciples, do you think God really wants people to go into poverty so that sacrifices to God are made?"

See look, here comes a widow. No one notices her but she is coming forward and puts in her two coins. That's a lot of money for her, in fact that may be all she has and she has given it to the Temple. But what is she going to do now? She has no money. What is she going to use to buy food? Who is going to help her out?

Disciples, do you really think God is requiring her to give all her money to the Temple just so it can be noted that she paid her offering this week? Where's the care for others? Where's the care for humanity? Where's the God that we know and claim, a God of love, a God of justice, a God of mercy?

And as the disciples ponder these questions, they flash back to just a few days ago when Jesus came into the Temple yard and overturned the money tables. They remember how mad he got when he saw the acts that were design to show faithfulness to God had been turned into money-making schemes through hiked-up prices and triple interest. They remember him becoming so angry that he flipped over the tables and scattered the animals. The disciples remember Jesus saying that the House of God had been turned into a house of thieves.

And then as they continue to ponder these questions, the disciples remember that just a few days ago, a scribe and Jesus were having a discussion. And the question was asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" And Jesus replied love your God with all your heart, with all your

mind, and with all your strength, and second, love your neighbor as yourself. And the scribes agreed with Jesus, even going onto say that these things are more important than any offering or sacrifice to God. Loving God and loving neighbor comes first and is more important than any offering or sacrifice.

And the disciples remember that Jesus told the scribe that he is not far from the kingdom of God.

So the disciples are remembering all these events and all these sayings as they ponder Jesus' questions. Does God really require someone's last two coins just because an offering must be paid? Well, no. What God does require is that all of God's children grow in faith, grow in relationship with God, and care for one another.

What our God does require from God's children is that we love God with all our heart, with all our mind, and with all our strength and to love one another as we love ourselves.

And it is out of this love of God, and out of this love for others, our practices of faith come forward as ways to deepen our relationship with God and with one another. They are not requirements of faith but grow out of a life of faith.

And it is in that moment that Jesus taught the disciples one of the great lessons in faith, that as followers of Jesus Christ, all our actions, all of our words should be grounded in our love for God and that we as leaders of the church have a huge responsibility to be stewards of justice, hope, and peace, not stewards of lists, sacrifices, and thievery. As leaders of the church we are called to ask the hard questions of ourselves, do our practices hurt or help our community of faith?

The author of Mark is asking us to hold up the widow's offering like a mirror and to see our practices of faith reflected back. The widow's offering is given us a chance to reflect on why we do the things we do as church. It is giving us the opportunity to remember that all of our practices, that all of our disciplines, that all of our missions, that all of our traditions are ways to deepen our relationship with God, not motions to simply go through as people of faith or ways to create injustice or separation.

For Mark, the story of the widow's offering forces us as people of faith to ask ourselves the question of why we do the practices and traditions that we do in church? Do we do them because we think they are what God requires? Or do we do them because they are grounded in the love of God and in the love of our neighbor and they deepen our relationship with God?

As Jesus and the disciples continued to watch the people come in and give their offerings, Jesus reminds the disciples that we are not called to go about the "busyness of church", but to be about the business of church of being a voice for the voiceless, making justice for the oppressed, sharing the wealth of God's love, and living out a faith that is grounded in the abundance of God's grace.

While Jesus was sitting there with the disciples, people watching, he was showing them that the House of God had become a place where the people did not come and celebrate the God who delivered them from Egypt, who freed them from bondage, who claimed them as God's own. He showed them that the House of God had become a place where people were simply going through the motions, where the people of God failed to understand the meaning behind their

practices, where the people of God had become so “invested in the business of ‘running the church’ and making a success of it that [they] actually thought God would require the very last two coins from a widow and would leave her with nothing.

Jesus was showing the disciples that God had come to them-The Word made Flesh- and that the leaders of the church didn’t see it. Jesus was showing the disciples that God had come to God’s children, in human form, and they couldn’t see the presence of God among them. Jesus was showing the disciples that God had come to the leaders of the church, The Word made Flesh, and the Temple was so trapped in the business of God, interpreting the law for their own gain, and forgetting that all God requires is that one love God with all one’s heart, with all one’s mind, and with all one’s strength and to love one’s neighbors as oneself that they missed the new beginning, the new order, the new relationship found in Jesus Christ.

That is why Jesus lifts up the widow’s offering, not as a sign of faith, not as a sign of sacrificial giving but as a mirror for us as people of faith, as a community of faith, as the church to see our actions reflected back at us. So we will ask ourselves as leaders of the church, as followers of Jesus Christ, do our practices hurt or help God’s children?

“The Jesus who speaks ...from this text calls [the people of God] to enter anew into the presence of God who drives away the pretensions and conventions of our religious life and asks us to live inside and out of his death and resurrection.”

And so Mark asks his readers and us today the hard question of why we do the things we do in church: Are our practices ways to deepen our relationship with God because they are grounded in loving God and loving our neighbors or are they simply the “business of running the church” and we fail to see the humanity, the presence of God among us, moving among us, calling us to a new beginning.

Today, the widow’s offering is held up like a mirror and our actions are reflected back at us. And we are reminded that we are called to be the church, the church of love, the church of justice, the church of mercy, the church of grace, not a church filled with stewards of injustice, lists, and the notion “Give until it hurts.”

We are called to be a people who love God with all our heart, with all our mind, and with all our strength. We are called to be a people who love our neighbors as we love ourselves. We are called to be a people whose practices of faith find their foundation in the greatest commandment. We are called to be a church where the business of the church is God’s people, not the business of tallies and figures.

May we always remember the widow’s offering as we live out the business of the church. Amen

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