

WHAT WE GIVE  
Mark 12: 38-44

People are funny about money. Have you noticed? It's a subject that elicits the strangest reactions. Mention money and some people clam up like you're talking about a terminal illness. Some get angry, especially when they think the government is about to take more of their hard-earned cash. Others burn with envy either because they have so little money or they have so much and they want still more. Far too many are simply clueless about money, and so they treat themselves to mountains of debt with their ever-ready credit card. Then there are those lovable folks who can talk about nothing else. They are walking, talking dollar signs, setting a price on everything. People the world over are funny about money.

In our lectionary reading Mark paints a picture of three kinds of attitudes toward money. The scribes, the rich folks, and a poor widow couldn't be more different in their approach to money.

As the crowds listened attentively to Jesus, the rabbi from Nazareth offered this trenchant comment about the scribes, the religious leaders: "Beware of the scribes, who like to go about in long robes and to have salutations in the market places and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts." Well, that's bad enough, this flaunting the perks of office, the respect of one's peers, the nicest clothes, the best seats at worship and at parties. Oh the petty satisfaction of being hailed as important! We all know the look of a strutting peacock, be it politician, preacher, or business tycoon. Jesus' words drip with sarcasm as he lifts up the vanity of these pompous little Napoleons.

But it is much worse than that. Jesus continues with his indictment, "Beware of the scribes...who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers." Vanity is one thing. Ingratiating oneself into the good graces of widows and then extorting money from them-well, that is no laughing matter. Sheer avarice, playing off people's religious convictions for one's own profit-that is simply beyond the pale. It's the television evangelist asking for yet another donation, assuring viewers that their gifts will be multiplied ten-fold. It's the unscrupulous religious appeal that barely disguises the greed, the manipulation, the peddling of the Gospel.

I remember Robert Tipton, that perfectly manicured charlatan who posed as a preacher on television. He begged his viewing audience for

donations and then promised them prayer cloths that would heal their diseases. Investigators discovered that the prayer requests mailed in by his gullible followers ended up behind his Dallas television studio in the trash dumpster. Meanwhile, the money was deposited in his unmarked Swiss bank account. “Beware of the scribes who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers.” Before he went to prison, Robert Tipton could offer some of the most heart rending appeals, especially when he would pray sanctimoniously, “O Jesus, touch their hearts and open their pocket books.” Jesus reminded us, “They will receive the greater condemnation.”

For all of us who receive money from the generosity of the people of God, these words of Jesus remind us again whose money this is. The money that you give belongs to God and God alone. Some of it you use to pay the staff of this congregation. And for that I am grateful. But I must say that Jesus’ words ring in my ears this morning as we come to pledge our time, talent, and treasure to God. I pray to God that we never prey on the vulnerable and I pray to God that we never mis-use the money that you give out of your generosity. I take these words of Jesus very personally.

There is a second group of folks in our reading from Mark’s Gospel. Jesus sat down near the treasury in the temple. He watched the people putting money into a box where offerings were collected. Jesus noticed that rich folks put in large sums of money. I suppose we are to assume that it was obvious that these high rollers were making a sizable contribution. Did the scribes and the priests make a big to do over these generous benefactors? Did the people ooh and aah as the coins rolled out of their long robes into the collection box? Did the givers themselves trumpet the amount of their donation, like bidders at Christie’s auction? I don’t know. But Jesus took notice and no doubt so did others.

This is Jesus’ comment about the gifts of the rich folks, “For they all contributed out of their abundance.” In other words, they had plenty to spare. Was this little more than a tip for God? Pocket change for the “good Lord above who has given me more than I deserve”? Indeed! What prayer would accompany such a gift? Maybe it would go something like this, “Here’s for you, God. Only one thing I ask: may the Gospel of Prosperity be true today and for evermore, even till I walk the streets of gold. Amen.”

Jesus saw the one special challenge facing the rich. The challenge of identifying themselves with their assets. “I am what I have. I am worth what I can count. I earn compound interest every single day, and therefore I am.” And thus the rich cannot help but feel disdain for those below them on that all-important socio-economic ladder, that ladder of success that feels so like a stairway to heaven. And like Leona Hemsley of old, there is a

temptation, a deep temptation to think of those below one as the “little people”, the little people who pay taxes while my people figure out every tax shelter the world offers.

When we were in China, my buddy Mark Wesselman and I watched the English language news shows. The shows were divided into two parts. First, the crime report where drug dealers, corrupt officials, and dissidents were paraded before the cameras to receive their harsh penalties. Once we got past that part, the real focus of the news cast began. There were scenes of trade shows, new manufacturing orders, trade agreements, production increases, trade surpluses, and building construction.

In other words, the news blared out this message loud and clear, “We’re growing, we’re getting stronger, we’re becoming richer every day.” In fact, while we were there the newscaster announced breathlessly that China now is second only to the United States in the number of billionaires with over 100 Chinese billionaires and counting. China is a country in love with the idea of being rich. So like us, so like the U.S. of A. I can only imagine what Jesus would say if he had watched those newscasts with us.

And then there is the widow. She lives in a world quite apart from the scribes and the rich folks. She can hardly imagine what their world is like, that acquisitive world of getting and accumulating. She has little and yet she offers it, regardless if little comes from her gift. There are no religious leaders putting her name on a plague. No one fawns over her tiny gift of two copper coins. No one but Jesus. He is stunned and amazed.

And so he calls his disciples to him and announces, “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. She out of her poverty has put in every thing she had, her whole living.” What more could be said of this astonishing act of generosity from a woman who had so little? What she gives is her whole living. Does she go from the treasury to take up her place at the temple gates asking for alms? She has no husband. Does she have children to care for her? Friends? Did Jesus find some way to help her, he who had no place to lay his head? How do the poor help the poor?

So is there more to this story? The way Mark tells it this poor widow who gave all she had disappears from the scene. And the very next story in Mark’s Gospel is Jesus telling his disciples that the entire temple, the treasury, the Court of the Gentiles, the Court of the Jews, the Holy of Holies—all of it will be destroyed. Jesus’ symbolic action of overturning the moneychangers in the temple foreshadows a time when the Roman army would overturn everything in the temple. And all the avarice and all the greed of the religious leaders—all that will come to a sorry end. The

moneychangers and the money lovers will alike discover that it was just money after all. Nothing more, just money.

And those with generous hearts will discover as did that widow in the temple that it is in giving that we receive. It is in sharing that we find community, the surprising community of caring hearts. I can't help but recall those packed churches in China, packed mainly with women. Young women, middle aged women, older women. No doubt, some are widows. There was something in their faces that said, "I understand that what we give is not so important as how we give. Gratefully, joyfully, thankfully." They understand at a deep existential level these words of Jesus, "She out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living."

On this Dedication Sunday, Jesus sits opposite the treasury, our treasury, where our hearts are. He sees the scribes ripping off the widows. He sees the rich folks giving from their abundance. And he sees the poor giving so little and yet so much. Jesus sits opposite the treasury still. He sees every kind of person and every kind of motive. And so we can be grateful, ever so thankful that he is kind and merciful, abounding in steadfast love, extending grace to all his children, his needy children.

"O Jesus, accept our gifts this day and give us glad and generous hearts. Amen."