

Sermon given by John H. Kemp
Pilgrim Congregational Church
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ASTOUNDING RISK

Psalm 146
Mark 12:38-44

Most of us have heard the story since childhood - Jesus praising the poor widow who offered her two small coppers, all she had! Usually we interpret this little story as Jesus' celebration of generosity, and it's no coincidence we often hear it in stewardship season! While this certainly is part of it, Jesus also was making a much more important point! Let's explore the passage a bit - and what it might mean to us.

Certainly he was not just giving testimony to a sweet lady with a generous heart. Nor was it a moralistic tale geared to church stewardship drives. Jesus wasn't sitting across from the temple depository pontificating to the disciples on how much their temple gifts should be! Surprisingly, perhaps, "how much" issues were really not on his front burner!

In truth, this short passage concretely illustrated what preceded it - our last Sunday's text with the great commandment: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, strength...and your neighbor as yourself.

In today's reading, Jesus responded to three contrasting practices of religion that he observed as he sat with his disciples across from the temple treasury.

First were the "religious righteous," those who knew they had all the answers, wore their righteousness on their sleeves, insisting their truth alone was God's truth, that their morality be binding upon the entire community. Jesus watched them strut up and down the street, with ordinary folks stepping out of their path, bowing in deference. How they loved it - and all the perks that came with their position - front row in the synagogue, head table at banquets, honor and privilege wherever they went!

But Jesus knew that, hidden under their robes and finery, these "righteous ones" were far from righteous where it counted - in God's sight. For all their eloquent prayers (Praise the Lord!), their deeds betrayed their true colors. Why, they even evicted poor widows onto the streets. That's really putting religion into practice! Now, even as they threatened Jesus' life, Jesus warned them they were hardly immune from God's judgment!

As Jesus watched the crowd bringing their tithes and offerings to the temple, he identified the second group of religious folk - those we'd call the religious mainstream, the rich and middle class folks who dutifully brought their required offerings to the temple and performed all the expected sacrifices and ritual. They were good, salt-of-the-earth people who went to the synagogue every sabbath and the temple for high holy days, dutifully listened to their rabbi's sermons, and tithed out of their relatively comfortable incomes.

They didn't flaunt their religion like the "religious righteous," but religion for them consisted of duties and obligations, which they fulfilled without complaint, even when it meant for some giving quite large sums as their temple offering. After all, if God had blessed them with bounty, God expected them to return gratefully in proportion to what they had received! Notice something very crucial: in no way whatsoever does Jesus criticize or condemn these folks for giving out of their abundance; in no way does he judge these folks simply because they were rich or middle class. What happens is that his attention suddenly is caught by a very different, most unexpected, person who appears in the midst of all those good Pilgrim-type folks!

That poor widow! Picture her shuffling toward the treasury, dressed in black tatters, veiled more in shame than modesty, bowed by the burdens of her station, feet bare and dirt-caked, hand tightly clutching those two coins she would soon give up. Why her of all people? Again Jesus had done the unexpected and unacceptable - making a woman the example of what he was trying to get across as God's way.

And a widow no less! In that time and place, widows were at the bottom of the pecking order for they no longer had a man to give them whatever status they once might have claimed. In fact, the root word in Hebrew, elem, from which the word widow comes, means "silent." So the widows, being both female and husbandless, were literally "the silent ones," without voice or position of any kind. Like the Samaritan in the parable, Jesus made the contrast absolute: the impoverished widow with no status whatsoever, versus the scribes and the comfortable wealthy and middle class folks, blessed with every advantage she lacked to make it.

But it wasn't the woman's poverty that made her gift significant to Jesus. What really touched him was that she, alone among all the contributors, gave her all.

The very rich, who had put in much; the moderately well-off, who had put in decent amounts; the struggling, who slipped in their pennies -- all those who'd gone before this widow had given some of what they had. The widow alone turned over everything she had. Those two almost worthless coins represented her last shred of material security, her fragile thread of hope for her future. She had the astounding faith to entrust herself completely to God - and that was exactly Jesus' point!

You see, Jesus was not really talking about drachmas and shekels, 2% or 5% pledges or tithes. At bottom, he was celebrating, not those who strutted their righteousness, nor those who did their religious duty then returned to everyday life, but those who made everyday life their arena for living out their faith with whatever they had to offer.

The widow's faith related not to religious compartments, but to her whole life, indeed, to her very survival. Her real gift was not those coins, but entrusting herself to God even in her poverty. While the religiously righteous were shutting doors to this woman, cutting her off from any future, her faith reopened her life to fresh meaning and hope, knowing that amidst her struggles, she walked not alone, but with God.

Lest the imagery seems irrelevant to our affluence, we might broaden it to confess our own poverty of faith. Do we live with anxiety or fear? Are we cynical about our human condition, our government, our future? A lot of politicians would assume we do! Do we feel that justice and opportunity are luxuries our society cannot afford, that hunger, homelessness and the lack of medical care are inevitable or perhaps even just desserts? Do we feel our own lives battered by whatever assaults us until we feel we have little left to give, whatever our material condition?

To use the title of one of Henri Nouwen's books, we believe God offers all of us the possibility to become "wounded healers." Don't we all live and love and heal with the strength God gives us in the midst of our human frailty? To live such a life generously and gratefully is to transform our modest gifts into treasure beyond measure. Isn't that what Jesus celebrated in the astounding faith of the widow? Isn't this what offers us hope?

The story's context - the last days before Jesus' arrest and crucifixion - remains crucial. Once again Jesus was reminding his disciples that faithfulness required risk. We risk little in our giving when plenty remains. We risk little when we isolate our spirituality or our ethical values in small compartments of our lives. We risk much when we give everything, even when it seems little. Jesus was preparing the disciples for what lay ahead. - the widow's risk was an apt parable of the cost of discipleship, of living fully the Great Commandment.

Remember, too, that his suggestion that a widow woman was the model of astounding faith was shocking and totally unexpected! What shocking and persistent ideas disturb us? Who in our arena of life just might have much to teach us, but from whom we don't really expect to learn anything? Faith is a gift that opens us to life in strange and unexpected places and ways!

Thank God for poor widows and other bearers of God's grace and truth! Amen.