

“A Nobody becomes A Somebody: Jesus notices the Widow”

Sermon Notes by the Rev. Arnold Bush, Priest in Charge, Episcopal Church of the Epiphany, Tallahassee, AL, 11.11.12, Proper 28B, Mark 12:38-44

Summary Sentence: Jesus, looking at the crowds in the Temple, notices the widow tossing small coins into a chest on the walls of the Temple.

I. Introduction: Jesus makes a nobody a somebody

Several thousand \$10 gifts to the Red Cross Relief on the East Coast can become several thousand “somebodies.” I recall--reaching for my charge card after eating pizza with a fellow priest--the cashier said, “Someone a few minutes ago paid your bill.” The somebodies across America gave millions of dollars to Hurricane relief and a somebody paid for my lunch.

In the Gospel today Jesus is on the Temple Mount. There are lots of crowds. Think of a rectangular area, three football fields long and one football field across. (900’ X 300’ or our property: 953’ the north fence line and 153’ frontage on Gilmer Ave.) As we read this story, what does Jesus see? He saw the Scribes, Pharisees, the Temple priest in the Holy of Holies, and Sadducees, and pilgrims from all over coming to Temple worship. It says Jesus was sitting down looking at the 12 large chests, the entire treasury against the wall with a trumpet shaped opening. These chests were placed around the walls, each marked for a particular purpose. They were placed under a colonnade called the Treasury. Each chest was designed for a particular need: Upkeep of the buildings, salary for all priests working in the Temple, one for the poor. Maybe causing a noticeable sound. Then, a Temple Tax of 10% for all Jewish persons to pay. He saw a rich man placing large amounts of money into the chests. The pilgrims traveling a great distance had to go to the moneychangers to trade their Roman coins for Hebrew coins and then purchase pigeons or sheep to make sacrifices to Yahweh.

Then Jesus saw a poor widow who was standing alone place two small coins worth a penny. He then calls over his disciples. This is a teachable moment. Look, this poor woman has put in more than any of all those who have dropped money into the alms boxes: Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, those wearing fine clothing. The rich ones have given out of their abundance, out of all their wants. But she has given out of her poverty, out of her substance, her needs. She is not holding back anything from God.

II. Looking at the Teachers of the Law

Jesus gives a warning: Beware of those who walk around the city in long royal priestly robes and a large stole. Jesus seems to be condemning such ostentatious behavior. As they walk around the streets of Jerusalem and the marketplaces they like to be greeted with respect and appreciation. In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 3 calls them hypocrites putting on sackcloth and ashes on their face when fasting. Or praying loud prayers in the marketplace. They gave lengthy prayers, always sought the seats in the synagogue. Synagogue was a place where all stood or sat, and the scroll was in the center and the chair was in the center where they spoke sitting down. They wanted the places of honor: At the concert they had the best seats in the house, a box on the side, or in the skyboxes in the stadiums.

They would show up at the door of the widow so she could give all her fortunes to the Temple. Finally most of this money would go to support the Scribes and Pharisees. They

were employed to make wills and conveyances to property to the Temple. They would offer long prayers of pretense for the widow.

III. The contrast of the Scribes with the Poor Widow.

They gave out of their wealth, abundance, they gave what they could easily afford. She gave out of her poverty. She gave out of her NEEDS, according to Peterson's translation, what could not afford to give. According to the New English Translation, she gave out of what she had to live on.

One theme in this story is: She did not hold anything back from God. In the culture of that day, she had no husband, no social security, no protection, and no right to own property. In the eyes of the culture she was a NOBODY. But by giving out of her NEED, what little she had to live on, she gave to the Temple.

Translated into today's culture, she has three cans of soup in the cabinet, a half loaf of bread, some sandwich meat, less than a quart of milk, a few pieces of fruit in a basket. She would bring her last can of soup, two cans of vegetables, and the last pieces of fruit to the Church Thanksgiving Basket. She would not hold back anything.

Some of us have this much food in our pantry, a freezer with lots of frozen meat, and frozen veggies, bottled water, wine, beer, soda all in the pantry. If you filled a grocery sack for the Thanksgiving Basket we would not miss the offering.

IV. What are the lessons we can practice in our giving?

1. She did not hold back. The others giving that day in the Temple just gave out of their abundance. What do we hold back from God? Prayers: I will pray later, tomorrow, I am not going to worship every Lord's day. I am holding back to so do some chores around the house or take in a sporting event.

Or when asked to volunteer for some ministry: I need some time for myself. I am going to back away from this ministry. I was serving as the night host for three families staying in the education building sleeping on rollaway beds, and eating in the youth kitchen. Lord, use me in any way to be responsive to these three families who are working but do not have a home. One family worked until 8 pm doing the shopping for McDonalds so they came in late. They need more burgers, and sweet tea, one wanted to share some of the trouble in her life. One was low on gasoline so I met her at the gasoline station to put gasoline into her car so she could drive to work on Thursday. I was there to clean up the kitchen so their children could go off to school and the parents to work.

When we are about to make a pledge to Church of the Epiphany, how much are we going to hold back? Zoe and I have always made a tithe to God's work. Each year we are able to increase our pledge by tithing off another stream of revenue. In looking up my income tax file, we gave over \$10,000 to church work. Cash, in-kind gifts to various charities in Birmingham, almost \$600 in 14 cents a mile in church and Habitat volunteer driving. We gave out of our abundance, but we do not want to hold back any time we can serve Jesus Christ.

2. She made an exchange: In Mark 10:5 blind Bartimaeus threw his cloak aside as he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. The verb throwing off his cloak means he made an exchange. He exchanged his security, knowledge, and wisdom for following Jesus. The poor widow threw the two coins into the treasury; what was the exchange in her life? She throws in the coins and she gets affirmation from Jesus. She is not a nobody but now a somebody recognized by Jesus. How does the exchange work for us? On Sundays we offer a percentage of our income to Christ. As we place a check or \$100 into the collection we are giving this to God. Money given to God is like congealed sweat. The sweat from completing tasks, work, selling, advising, delivering mail or advice. In making these financial offerings we are offering our work. Then he blesses us. Those who refuse to make offerings are saying to God, I do not need your strength and blessing.
3. As we think about this story, we ask what are the highest motives for giving to the Church?

There are various motives for giving:

- We give out of habit. Because my parents gave to the work of God through the Church. I have always given to the church.
- We give out of guilt. I feel guilty when I do not do my part. It is something I should do.
- Some give out of a dollar need in the congregations. Often the lay leaders make a case why we need so much to do what Christ is calling us to do in this congregation. The church needs an outreach ministry, a youth ministry, maintenance of the facilities and yard. We want to give to a dollar need.
- But this is a greater need. Here is what I have experienced as the highest motive for giving. Two MOTIVES: God created us with a need for him. He wired us in such a way that for us to be truly human, to be a functional human being means we must give to aspects outside of ourselves. This need to give goes deep into our DNA. Can you imagine an older teen or 20-year-old who has no concept of giving? Extremely self centered, extremely selfish, always wanting others to make them happy. People who give themselves to the welfare of others are emotionally healthy. If they are tight fisted with all their money, then they do not experience blessing coming back to them. I recall Jessie who had two grown children working in town. Her husband died early without life insurance, she was in her 50s working as a domestic house cleaner. I recall a member on the stewardship canvass saying we do not need to give Jessie a pledge card. She even pays all her bills. Look, Jessie works six days a week, her income may be low, but she has a need to place some dollars in an offering envelope and give to the work of Christ. What if the Epiphany were given a bequest from a will of \$200,000? Advent Lillian AL, a smaller congregation in Baldwin County, received

a \$250,000 from a will. Do you think that they did not need a stewardship drive with this big bequest? Yes, every family and individual needed to give a percentage of his or her incomes to Christ's work in Advent.

Here at Church of the Epiphany, every member has a need to give. In light of the Gospel story of the poor widow, Jesus noticed that she gave out of her need, her poverty. I do not have any hesitation saying that anyone attempting to be a devoted follower of Christ has a need to give. Their self-centeredness, lack of giving is just keeping them from being a fulfilled human being.

- A second motive is to give out of our gratitude. Persons who are grateful for the blessings in their lives are usually more generous. There seem to be many ads on TV and radio with a theme: this is your money, keep this money, and do not let anyone take it from you. EG A gentleman in a large adult Church School in Decatur, AL The topic was how God helps us. I will call him Donnie. I was very proud of taking an antique car to rebuild the motor and an entirely new paint job. So Donnie, you said you did this all by yourself. Others asked: Read the manuals, advice at the part store, friend who came over use the winch to pick up the motor, your wife who encouraged you? God who gave you a healthy body and mind to earn a living. Did you make the air you breathe or the food to nourish you? While attending my 50th Class Reunion from Seminary at Sewanee, the lecturer was Tom Long from Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta. In his lecture on preaching he said one of the tasks of preaching is to help move Christians in their maturity toward living gratefully. He said there seem to be two kinds of Christians as they mature in years. One is the type who is always complaining, always throwing rocks at the culture, and always seeing how terrible the world is. The other is one who realizes all they have comes from God: the oxygen in the air, the water from the aquifers, the family and friends they have, the ability to work and help others. A grateful person, thankful to be alive.

Conclusion:

What did Jesus see in the Temple that day? The Collect for purity: Almighty God to whom all hearts are open, all desires are known, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

What is each of us exchanging in worship? What are we giving and receiving? What does Jesus see happening with us in worship every Sunday? What is Jesus seeing in Central Alabama? Those giving in to hedonistic behaviors or those who make checks to support His work through the churches?

