

HYPOCRISY AND FAITH

Mark 12:38-44

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

November 11, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 12, verses 38 through 44. It is on page 718 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus notices a poor widow who seems insignificant in the eyes of the world, but not in the kingdom of heaven. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 12, beginning at verse 38, we read in Jesus' name.

³⁸ And in his teaching he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces ³⁹ and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, ⁴⁰ who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

⁴¹ And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. ⁴³ And he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. ⁴⁴ For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

This text obviously has something to do with money, stewardship, and giving. So let me start with a disclaimer: The church is not having financial difficulties, and the council did not ask me to give a "Get out the Dollars" sermon. That's not what this is. As far as I know, the church is doing just fine. If you have questions about that, talk to someone else.

Another disclaimer: I have absolutely no idea what any of you give. Apparently Jesus can watch the offering box from across the courtyard and see what people are putting in. He even knows how much money you have that you're not putting in, but I have no idea. If you use offering envelopes, somewhere, somebody keeps a record of that money so they can give you a tax receipt. I have never seen those records, and I don't want to see them.

I recognize that money is necessary for things like keeping the lights on, plowing the snow, and paying my salary—which, by the way, I do like very much; I just don't want to talk about it. I recognize that money is necessary, so I'm very thankful for other people in the congregation who do know about money and are willing to deal with it.

But money and the Church is always a sensitive subject. And I suppose it's because we've seen so many examples of abuse. Maybe you've heard sermons on this text where the preacher basically says, "Even if all you have is two pennies, cough it over." That, by the way, is wrong and contrary to what the text actually says. That would be an example of devouring widows' houses (12:40). Or maybe you've heard a pastor asking for money so he can buy a private jet.

That actually happened. The pastor's last name even was "Dollar." I'm not even kidding; you can't make this stuff up. So we get a little sensitive about money and the Church, and pastors are especially aware of this sensitivity.

So why are we talking about it? If it were up to me, I would probably never even think of preaching on this text. But the lectionary hands it to us, and it reminds us that this is part of God's Word too.

The first thing I want you to recognize about this text is that it's not so much about money as it is about hypocrisy and faith. And I'm not making this up. I think if you pay attention to the text, you will see this for yourself. Money is one of the topics, but hypocrisy is the bigger problem, and the faith of the poor widow is what Jesus commends.

The text comes to us in two parts. The first part is about the scribes and their hypocrisy, while the second part is about a poor widow and her faith-filled generosity. At first they might seem like separate passages, but they are clearly connected, and they certainly belong together.

It begins with the hypocrisy of the scribes. The setting is the temple in Jerusalem, during what we refer to as Holy Week. It's the week leading up to Jesus' death and resurrection. On Sunday he rode into Jerusalem on a small donkey. And as best as we can tell, it is now Tuesday of that week, just three days before Good Friday.

There's already some tension between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders, of which the scribes were a part. They did most of the teaching in Judaism while the priests did the liturgical work in the temple —the sacrifices and such. So the priests and scribes already had it out for Jesus. Put since arriving in Jerusalem, things had gotten even worse. Jesus was causing trouble in the temple. First, he flipped over tables and drove the merchants out (11:15-18). Then he started teaching in the temple. The leaders of the Jews didn't take very kindly to this, because they didn't give him permission to teach there (11:27-33). And now he is specifically teaching against the scribes and their hypocrisy. It's not enough that Jesus hogs their teaching space, now he tells the people to not even listen to the scribes.

"Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." (12:38-40)

Remember, this was in the temple. It would be kind of like someone coming here and saying, "Beware of your pastor." I wouldn't like it any more than the scribes did. But Jesus can do this, because he is God. The temple was built to be a dwelling place for him.

Now there were a few scribes that Jesus did get along with. They weren't all bad. Earlier that day, Jesus even said to one of them, **"You are not far from the kingdom of God"** (12:35). When someone devotes their life to studying and teaching the Word of God, it doesn't always go horribly wrong. But we are called to be careful, because sometimes it does.

In the case of the scribes, it usually did, because Jesus warns his hearers about the entire class of scribes. They were hypocrites. They were in it for the honor and recognition. They liked to walk around in their long scribal robes. Now there's nothing actually wrong with robes. It's sort of like a uniform. It helps to identify a person. But the scribes liked their robes just a little

too much. And they liked all the recognition that went along with being a scribe. They liked it when people greeted them with honor. They liked having the best seats in the synagogue or at feasts. It was hypocrisy. They were in it for the honor.

But it's not always wrong to honor people. There are appropriate situations to do so. One example of this is our veterans. We honor our veterans, and we thank them for their service. This is good and appropriate. One of the reasons this is appropriate is because nobody serves in the armed forces just to be recognized. If what you want is recognition, there are safer and easier ways to get it. Risking your life is too high a price to pay for mere recognition. In fact, many of our veterans received the opposite of honor and recognition. They were treated with contempt because of their service. These veterans are worthy of extra honor, because, instead of recognition, they were treated with shame.

So it's certainly not wrong to honor people. But in our own lives we should be mindful of the danger that goes along with honor. Do we do the things we do in order to be honored? This is sinful, and Jesus condemns the scribes for this kind of hypocrisy.

Now if Jesus stopped there, it might seem like their hypocrisy was a victimless crime. But there are no victimless crimes. So Jesus goes on. They **"devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers."** So the widows are the primary victims. And then, I suppose, the people who have to listen to the long prayers are the lesser victims.

And we don't really know exactly how the scribes devoured widows' houses. It may be that some of them talked widows into leaving them their estates. It may also be that they found some loopholes in the law in order to lay claim to their property. Or, if we consider the connection with the second half of this text, it may be that they pressured widows into putting more and more of their money into the temple treasury. Whatever they were doing, it was very, very bad. They were exploiting the very people they should have been most zealous to protect.

We see one of these widows in the second half of the text. In contrast to the hypocrisy of the scribes, we see the faith of this poor widow.

And there might be some hypocrisy in the second half of this text too, just not in the widow. Many rich people were putting in large sums of money. And this wasn't a private thing; it was very public. The offering boxes at the temple were designed to amplify the sound of coins being dropped in. And back then, all of their money was in coins; there was no paper. So you could tell the big givers by how much clang was coming from the offering box. Sometimes the people tending the offering boxes would even applaud the really big givers. So you can imagine that hypocrisy became a temptation for the wealthy. It doesn't mean they were all hypocrites, but the temptation was very strong.

But then this poor widow comes along. And Jesus notices her. And somehow —probably by divine insight— he knew that she was a widow and that these two copper coins were all she had to live on. Our English translations say that these two coins added up to a penny. This is a little bit misleading, because inflation means that a penny isn't what it used to be. So I did the math for you, and it turns out these two copper coins are equivalent to about a dollar or two in today's currency. Still, not much. Nobody would have noticed her. In fact, as she put her two little coins in, they probably tried to not make eye contact. But Jesus noticed her. And he made sure his disciples noticed her too. According to Jesus, she put in more than anyone else.

And this is really quite amazing. The offering money was for the service of the temple. The priests would buy bulls and goats and all kinds of sacrificial animals with it. A dollar or two doesn't go very far when you're dealing with livestock. They needed some real money, and they applauded the big givers.

Even today, you see charities with different levels of recognition for givers. You give a little bit, you're in the bronze club. You give a lot, maybe you're in the gold club. We don't do this at church—that would be wrong—but a lot of charities do, and apparently people like the recognition. But Jesus' givers club is a bit different. Rich people put in large sums, whatever. A poor widow puts in a dollar or two, platinum club. It's very strange.

But I suppose one of the things we learn from this is that God doesn't need our money. He doesn't. We don't give offering because God needs it. Now, this congregation does need a certain amount to be able to function. That's just the way it is. But even if we all quit giving, and Trinity has to close her doors, the Gospel would still be preached. The Word and the Sacraments do not need money to be preached and administered. God will see to this. So the amount doesn't matter to God, because he doesn't actually need any of it.

So in the case of this widow, it's more about the faith behind her offering. She trusts that God is her provider, so she is free to give all she has. It's not that she gives in order for her offering to be multiplied back to her. There are preachers who teach that. All that does is play on people's greed and exploit the poor. But that's not the way it works. The widow gives freely, trusting that her God will provide for her daily needs. Somehow, the next day, God will provide for her daily bread.

So this text is connected to the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer. That's the one that says, "Give us this day our daily bread." And notice the word "daily." We don't pray for our weekly bread or our monthly bread. We pray for our *daily* bread. If you eat your last slice of bread before you go to bed tonight, when you pray as Jesus taught us to pray, be assured that it is God's will to answer that prayer and give you your daily bread the next day. The God who feeds the birds of the air will also feed you.

We saw a miraculous example of this in the Old Testament lesson (1 Kings 17:8-16). There was another widow in that text. This widow was gathering some sticks so she could cook one last meal for her and her son. But then the prophet Elijah comes along, and he has a better idea, though it doesn't really sound better at first. "How about, instead of using the last of your food to make something for you and your son, you make something for me instead?" And Elijah promised that the little bit of flour and oil would last until the drought was over. It could be a mean trick, or Elijah could be a true prophet of God. It turns out that Elijah was a true prophet of God, and this little bit of oil and flour, that was only enough for one last meal for two people, fed the three of them for a very long time. The widow believed the word of the prophet, and she was saved.

If you are down to your last piece of bread, it may be that God will feed you by a miracle. More likely, however, since you are sitting in the midst of a congregation, God will use this congregation to feed you. No one who belongs to a Christian congregation should ever be homeless or hungry. That is because God has given us to one another to love and care for each other. One of the ways we do this here is through a benevolence fund. You might not hear much about it, because we don't publicize it when people receive funds from it. But it's our way of making sure our members have their basic daily needs met. So when you give your offering,

you can be certain that you won't be homeless and hungry because of it, if, of course, you tell someone when you have a need. And this is important. You really shouldn't give anything in the offering unless you are also willing to ask for help when you need it. Don't give unless you are also willing to receive. And I mean that. If you have a need, and you don't tell the congregation, you are robbing the congregation of the privilege of serving. God has given you to the other members of this congregation, and he has given those other members to you. Sometimes the congregation is the method God uses to care for his people. To reject congregational help is to reject God's help, and that should never be done. God cares for his people.

Now what about this widow who gave her last two coins. The text doesn't say what happened to her the next day or later that week. But she gave, trusting her God to take care of her. We assume that, somehow, her God provided for her daily needs. And we do know this: Her God was sitting right there in the temple courtyard watching her. She gave, trusting her God, and her God was watching her with physical, human eyes. He knew her need. And we do know what he did about it. We know what happened to Jesus later that week. He went to the cross for her poverty.

Now you might be thinking, *Come on, pastor. I know the cross is the solution for our sins, but poverty? Really? Yes, really.* The cross is the answer to poverty. It is the answer to *world* poverty. We, of course, as Christians and as human beings, still have an obligation to help those who cannot help themselves, so the cross doesn't get us off the hook. But Jesus on the cross is truly the answer to world poverty. Do you believe this? You should. Here's the thing: Anything we do to help our brothers and sisters in need is only a temporary solution. It's good, but it's only temporary. Even if you have all the food you could ever need, at some point your body will lose the ability to eat that food. All the food in the world can only keep you alive until you die. But at the cross, Jesus offers a permanent solution. We might overlook this, because we're always looking for temporary and immediate solutions, but Jesus looks long term, and he accomplishes a fix that will last long beyond the grave. When he took your sins upon himself, he won for you an inheritance in the kingdom of heaven that is unfading and unlimited. The widow gave all she had to live on; Jesus gave his life for her; he gave his life for you. Her sacrifice, as great as it was, could only foreshadow Christ's sacrifice. Jesus' death and resurrection really is the solution to every evil. By this sacrifice he has purchased for his believing saints an eternal kingdom that will lack nothing. This kingdom cannot be bought; your offering won't get it for you. It is given to you freely, by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ your Savior. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.