

“Out of Poverty”

Mark 12:38- 44

12 November 2006

the Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

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As he taught, he said, ‘Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market- places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.’

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.’

Prayer.

1. Mark 12:38- 44.

- We find Jesus again in the Temple courtyard, where we left him last week.
- Scribes and other religious authorities are asking him challenging questions. Their motive is to trap Jesus into saying something that would make an arrest justifiable. They are out to get him.
- Follows on the heels of the one scribe's personal inquire regarding the greatest commandment: to love God and your neighbors as yourself. That is correct, Jesus tells him. "You are not far from the kingdom."
- Following up on this one encounter with this solitary scribe, Jesus observes the actions of the vast majority of this scribe's colleagues.
- The scribes were lay professionals, scholars in the law - like conservative seminary professors today, biblical literalists when it comes to the law.
- They were privileged members of society. Most of them held considerable wealth. Every penny of their wealth came to them directly or indirectly from the coffers in the Temple. They lived off the people.
- They wielded considerable power and authority.
 - Power came to them by virtue of them acting as a judge. They knew the religious law better than anyone else, so they were in a position of judging the innocence or guilt of those brought before them.
 - Their authority came in the handing down conditions for purification; that is, penance, what a person had to do to cleanse themselves of their sin

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and be made right in the eyes of the social order. Until one was purified, they were a social outcast. There existed tremendous social pressure to be clean, sinless; and if unrighteous or unclean, to be purified once again.

- Because of their wealth, power, and authority most scribes lived a privileged life.
- This is a sharp contrast to the lives of the common person, even more so to the lives of widows and orphaned. The vast majority of people lived in poverty; what wasn't taxed by the Romans to keep their empire growing, the Temple took most of the rest. Life was very hard, working sun up to sun down 6 days a week to carve out a living.
- Furthermore, widows were impoverished by the inheritance laws of the day. They were left with nothing, taken from their homes, and if lucky forced to become dependant upon their eldest son and his family. If there were no sons, it was not uncommon for the widow to become destitute.
- Jesus doesn't condemn money, power, and authority. But he does condemn its use for personal gratification. Jesus condemns the use of money, power, and authority for personal gain, such as...
 - Walking around in long robes: can't do physical work, symbols of luxury.
 - Greeted with respect in the marketplace: upholding a public image.
 - Best seats in the synagogue: so the people who yearn to benefit from worship and learning at the synagogue are placed at a disadvantage.
 - Places of honor at banquets: to boost the self- esteem.
 - Devour widow's houses: on the pretense of inheritance laws, evict widows from their homes, sell them, deposit the proceeds into the treasury, and financially benefit themselves.
 - For the sake of appearance say long prayers: prayers not to God, prayers to make themselves appear holy, learned, and important to the people.
 - **"They will receive the greater condemnation,"** Jesus teaches us.
- To illustrate his teaching, Jesus takes his disciples to the Temple's collection boxes, where they become observers of what he has been teaching.
- Many wealthy people but in large sums of money. Undoubtedly, these were many of the scribes he was just talking about; along with the other privileged members of society.
- The gifts were public knowledge, for everyone knew everyone's dollar amount. Knowing what people gave gives Jesus great insight for his teaching. There was no hiding in anonymity.
- A widow comes and puts in two small copper coins. We know today that these coins were worth 1/20 of a penny; perhaps less valuable than the material they were made of.
- Jesus knows that her gift is everything she had. Everything. The widow sacrifices everything with no assurance that her future needs would be taken care of. Where would her next meal come from?

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- This is a sign of her complete and absolute faith in God.
 - The contrast is made of those who give out of their abundance, compared to those who give sacrificially; in this case sacrifice everything she has.
 - The result, "***this poor widow has put in more.***" Q: More what? A: More of her life. Her giving is life changing. The wealthy return to their luxury.
2. I see four blatant truths spring out of today's Gospel lesson for us today.
- **First, honor and wealth gained at the expense of the poor results in condemnation.**
 - "How might this impact me today?" you may ask.
 - If ever you have wondered why some find it important to make sure that their investments and retirement savings are in companies of social responsibility, now you know! Perhaps it's time to check your own. Do the shares of stock, bonds, or mutual funds in which you invest take advantage of the poor? Inhumane labor conditions? Oppressive forms of foreign governments, etc ...?
 - As Christians, we are obliged to make sure our investment do not grow at the expense of the poor.
 - "Ah, I'm not rich enough to have investments. Jesus can't mean me," others may say. You are rich enough when you exercise the power of the dollar. Do you spend your dollars in a socially responsible way? Do you care under what conditions your shirt was made? How the coffee beans came to be ground and used in your coffee this morning? What it really took to produce your child's favorite toy?
 - Perhaps we need to be a bit more knowledgeable and responsible in the use of our money... and make sure it isn't used at the expense or detriment of another.
 - **Secondly, Jesus is telling us that giving is not an option.** If you are going to follow Jesus, you must give your money. Like it or not, it's that straight forward.
 - Running this building, paying the pastor's salary, covering the insurance, making sure we support missions for the poor and the needy: it all costs money.
 - The church cannot be taken for granted. Its very existence depends on every disciple.
 - It doesn't matter if you have a lot of money, or just a little bit of money. The widow only had 2 1/20 of a cent, yet she gave it all away with no assurance in how she would care for herself in the future.
 - We give money to what is important to us. If you want to know what is important to me, look at the check register in my checkbook. If you want to find out where your priorities are in life, likewise, take a peek into your own checkbook.
 - Giving back a portion of what God has given you is required. How high of a priority is God in your life?

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- **Thirdly, Jesus tells us that giving to God must be sacrificial.**
 - Q: What does this mean? A: If it doesn't hurt, you haven't given enough.
 - It's not enough to give out of your abundance. You must be willing to give something up, something you want or desire. You must be willing to sacrifice; to make a noticeable change in your life and lifestyle, both in your behavior and in your economic status, to be a follower of Christ.
 - If you give out of your abundance, then you aren't any different; your life hasn't been changed; you go back to living just like the way you used to.
 - Sacrificial giving is a must for both the rich and the poor. No one gets left off the hook on this one. Jesus asks us to make a personal, financial sacrifice.
 - **Fourthly, joy comes when you can relate your own sacrifice with the sacrifice Christ made for you.**
 - Jesus gave everything for you and for me. He gave up his dignity, his life, his very being for our behalf. Jesus sacrificed everything!
 - So what do we do in return? What can we do?
 - When we give sacrificially, we come ever closer to him, we identify with his sacrifice, we identify with and tap into his love like we never before thought possible.
3. I trust and pray that no one is going to go home mad today, because I have been so open and up front about our Gospel lesson and its focus on money. If you do, then you haven't heard what I've had to say or you're feeling guilty for slighting God.
- I hope you know that I address this vital issue with a degree of pastoral fondness and firmness.
 - We have grown to know, trust, and love each other low these past 6 years. It is not my intent to harm you.
 - It is my intent to challenge you weekly with the Gospel. And today, it just happens to be Jesus speaking about money.
 - Listen:
 - Do not gain wealth at the expense of the poor,
 - Give your money away. Giving your money is an expectation of being a Christian,
 - Give until it hurts; giving must be a sacrifice, and
 - Giving until it hurts makes us one with Christ who gave to us until it hurt, and so much more.

My friends, my beloved: This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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