

What Shall We Give?

Mark 12:38-44

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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November 17, 2024/Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

For most of this fall we've been spending time in the gospel of Mark. We haven't covered the whole book, obviously but we have encountered Jesus at multiple points along his journey toward Jerusalem. We have seen him at his provocative, liberating, disorienting, reorienting, and saving best.

Today marks the end of our little tour through Mark. Next Sunday is the last Sunday of the Christian year and then we are into Advent.

Next Sunday is also Memorial Sunday, a day where we light candles and remember those in our community who have died in the last year and beyond. Ryan Siemens will be preaching next Sunday as Naomi and I will be celebrating our anniversary weekend.

So, for our last Sunday in our little series on Mark, I decided to rewind and use last Sunday's gospel reading. I chose to do this for the simple reason that I have never preached on this passage before whereas the reading for this Sunday was one that I've preached on twice.

It was a mathematical decision that I trusted would bear theological fruit. I trust that God will speak to us in such a way as to make this a fitting wrap up for our series.

My sermon this morning is divided into three parts.

To start with, I want to talk briefly about generosity. If you've ever heard this passage preached on before, I'm guessing this may be where it went.

The rich people contribute to the temple treasury by skimming off the top of their wealth; a poor widow deposits two little coins, worth barely anything at all.

(If anyone still has actual pennies and you were to throw two of them into the offering bag later this morning, that would be something like what this woman did.)

Jesus looks at this scene and says, “this widow has put more in than everyone else.”

Strictly speaking, this is not true. The math is absurd. The widow has put in next to nothing. She has not put more in than anyone.

But Jesus, of course, isn’t doing math. He’s doing theology.

He’s not praising the woman’s actual contribution but her heart, her devotion, her trust, her faith, perhaps even her boldness and prophetic courage (more about this later).

Well, we look at this story and we get busy with the generosity application. We should give like this widow! This is clearly Jesus’ point, right?

I’ve even heard some people crudely turn this story back into a math lesson. We should do a quick calculation and give the same *proportion* of our wealth as this poor widow (or at least much closer than we do!). We should “give until it hurts,” just like she did.

This is to oversimplify the story (and probably miss the point).

I of course do think that followers of Jesus should be generous, that we should hold our material wealth lightly and with open hands.

I think Jesus’ life and teaching point to this quite consistently. Jesus was poor. He did not accumulate much of anything. He was able move lightly among wealthy tax-collectors and social outcasts and everything in between.

He was not motivated by money; he did not cling to things. Indeed, he saw the love of money as spiritually corrosive and said that we cannot serve both God and money (remember his conversation with the rich young man that we encountered earlier this fall).

So, yes, we should be generous people.

But I don't think Mark included this story in his gospel to wag a moral finger at his readers and tell them to get off their wallets to support the church budget. I think there's more going on than this.

This brings us to part two.

In the gospel of Luke, the very first thing Jesus does once he emerges from his temptation in the wilderness is to return to his hometown, stand up in the synagogue, take the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and read these words:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Luke 4:18).

Good news to the poor. Release to the captive, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed.

Now, he is near the end of his ministry. He has, as we've seen, antagonized the religious leaders in much of what he has done and what he has taught. He has elevated the poor and unsettled the rich.

He has declared that it is the sick who need a physician, not the healthy (and implied that those who think they are healthy are far sicker than they think). He has opened blind eyes, set people free, proclaimed good news.

And now he is in temple courts in Jerusalem, right in the middle of the religious, spiritual, cultural epicentre of the life of his people.

He surveys the scene and says:

Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces 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 (Mark 12:38-40).

This is the immediate context in which Jesus directs his disciples' attention to the poor widow and her offering.

He has just condemned a corrupt religious system that reduces people to doing precisely what this widow is doing—throwing a few pennies toward the maintenance of a temple and a system that has lost sight of what it is for.

Far from being anything like “good news” for the poor, it is devouring them and reducing them to poverty.

Tim Geddert puts it like this in his commentary on Mark:

[I]n context, the praise this woman has earned also appears bittersweet. Her piety and personal sacrifice are to be applauded, but what is the cause of her poverty, and what will be done with her gift? Mark has just pictured Jesus condemning religious leaders who reduce widows to poverty (12:38-40). Now Mark creates the impression that this woman's gift aids a religious system in adorning the scribes (12:38) and the temple (13:1), both of which stand poised for God's judgment (12:40; 13:2).

Through no fault of her own, this poor widow who has sacrificed so much, becomes a fitting symbol for a temple and a city that will soon lie in ruins. In the words of the OT's most famous lament, “How lonely sits the city... how like a widow she has become” (Lam. 1:1).¹

Immediately after this passage, Jesus and his disciples leave the temple. His disciples sound a bit like wide-eyed tourists staring at a European cathedral for the first time.

Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!

Jesus responds ominously: You see all this? It's all coming down. Not one stone will be left on another.

¹ Timothy J. Geddert, *Mark: Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Scottsdale, AZ: Herald Press, 2001), 293-94.

Jesus was, of course, right. The temple was destroyed a few decades later when the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem to quell a series of rebellions.

The poor widow is indeed giving all she has to a corrupt system that is destined for judgment and destruction.

This passage is much more than a tidy moral lesson to get off our wallets.

It is a stinging critique of those who care more about being seen to be religious and pious and generous (!) than they do about actually embodying the good news that Jesus proclaimed and enacted way back in Luke 4.

There is a warning here for all religious institutions, including our own.

We do not exist for ourselves. We are to be, in our own small way, an enactment of the kingdom whose arrival Jesus announced when he stood up to read in the synagogue in Nazareth.

Good news to the poor. Freedom for the oppressed. Sight for the blind. Release for the captives.

I know that we already lean in these directions in all kinds of ways. I think of our work with refugees, volunteering at the soup kitchen, giving to organizations like Streets Alive and MCC, supporting inmates at the jail, visiting those in hospitals... the list could go on.

I think there is something deep in the DNA of our community—maybe of Mennonites more generally—that knows Jesus calls us to the bottom, to the hard and broken places, the sad and lonely places, the forgotten places.

We believe that when we do something for “the least of these,” we are doing it for Jesus.

This is all good and we must never forget this. We should always be thinking about how we might lean more creatively in these directions in a cultural context increasingly defined by addiction, despair, loneliness, poverty, and injustice.

God help the religious institution that in any way becomes more about their own prestige and maintenance than about the ones who initially received the kingdom as good news.

This, surely, is one of the things this story ought to remind us of.

Part three. I want to focus on the last few words of our text this morning.

She out of her poverty has put in everything she had, ***all she had to live on***.

Those last six words in English are not a literal rendering of the Greek. The literal translation would be three small words: “her whole life.”

She put *her whole life* in.

Now, it’s easy to make too much of this. No translation is 100% literal. All work with different grammars and syntaxes to render the *meaning* in terms that are understandable.

But it’s interesting, isn’t it? In giving her whole life, might this poor widow be prophetically pointing ahead to what Jesus would do only a few short days later.

Debie Thomas it well in an essay on this passage:

Whether she knew it or not, the widow's action in the Temple that day was prophetic. She was a prophet in the sense that her costly offering amounted to a holy denunciation of injustice and corruption. Without speaking a word, she spoke God's Word in the ancient tradition of Isaiah, Elijah, Jeremiah, and other Old Testament prophets.

But she was also prophetic in the Messianic sense, because her self-sacrifice prefigured Jesus's... The widow gave everything she had to serve a world so broken... Days later, Jesus gave everything he had to redeem, restore, and renew that world.²

Another commentator put it like this:

² <https://journeywithjesus.net/essays/2003-out-of-her-poverty>

[Jesus] is [also] on his way to giving “the whole of his life” for something that is corrupt and condemned: all of humanity, the whole world.³

Naomi and I were talking about my sermon over breakfast yesterday. We talked a bit about the text and about some of the ways I was going to be talking about it this morning and how I might bring it to an end.

I can’t remember if she said it or I said, but one of us said, “Most of my sermons end up in the same place. With proclaiming a God who does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.”

I’ve heard it said that most pastors really have one sermon and the longer I preach the more I grudgingly agree.

I don’t particularly like being predictable. Or being a cliché. But I don’t apologize for it. I think it’s a truth that we need to hear each week. It’s a truth that I need to hear each week, at any rate.

It would not be difficult to leave you with a wagging moral finger at the end of this sermon and at the end of our series on Mark.

Option A: Private morality lesson. Most of us are relatively wealthy people. None of us are as desperate as the widow in Jesus’ story. So, give. More.

Option B: Social justice lesson. The story of the widow is a clear critique of social injustice, so let’s make sure we’re doing a better job resisting corrupt systems, going to the margins, and addressing needs in our community. We must never grow complacent or else we’ll stand under the judgment of God, just like those temple elites. So, do. More.

I don’t like leaving people with morality lessons. For starters, I generally don’t like making people feel bad about themselves (especially in the middle of a pastoral review! That’s a joke ☺).

But that’s not a great reason in and of itself. Sometimes, it’s appropriate to feel bad! My guess is that Jesus did not intend for his comments to be received warmly by the temple elites!

³ Pete Peery, “Homiletical Perspective on Mark 12:38-44” in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 289.

The main reason I end my sermons the way I do is because I believe my job is to proclaim the good news of the gospel, not to give you weekly morality lessons.

And the good news of this story—of the story of Mark’s gospel, the story of all of Scripture—is of God himself, in Jesus Christ, giving his whole life for a sin-sick world.

For people who don’t deserve mercy. For people who aren’t particularly righteous or virtuous. For people whose priorities aren’t what they should be.

For people who have good intentions but can’t act consistently on them. For people who forget or ignore the morality lesson about fifteen minutes after they’ve heard it.

The title of my sermon today is “What Shall We Give?”

The answer, of course, is our lives. It’s not about math or money or morality, it’s about offering all of who we are as a response of gratitude to the One who gave all of who he is for us.

This isn’t about earning a prize. It’s about accepting and responding to a gift.

Wagging moral fingers don’t really work. Perhaps you’ve noticed this? We will rarely be good because someone tells us to be good (even a preacher!).

We might be good in response to being on the receiving end of goodness. We might extend mercy in response to the mercy we have been shown. We might love because He first loved us.

We might give generously in light of what we have been given.

May God help us to accept the gift of salvation that Jesus freely offers. And may God help us to give our whole lives to him in response.

Amen.

