

“Everything She Had”

Mark 12:38-44

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 2003

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The Bible is a big book, or more accurately, a big collection of many books of many kinds of writing. There is history, letters, poetry, apocalypse, proverbs, narrative, and all sorts of other things in this big, old book. There is so much that it is almost overwhelming to take it all in. Of necessity, we must be selective. Over a three year cycle, the lectionary tries to cut a wide swath through the Bible. And of course, after three years, we start the cycle over again. So, even though, over several years, we can cover a great deal of the Bible, there is still much that gets overlooked or just glanced at before we move on to something else.

The church in America tends to spend a great of its time in loud argument over things like homosexuality, or divorce and remarriage. But the interesting thing to me is that these matters rarely ever come up in Scripture. There are about 900 more references in the Bible to money than to sexuality. If I preached about money as much as the Bible preaches about money, you would be hearing about money a whole lot more than a couple of Sundays in the Fall.

We pick up the story in today’s scripture where Jesus and his disciples have come to the capital city of Jerusalem, the seat of national power and religious power and moral and economic power – it is all right here in Jerusalem.

Well, when the disciples come to this city, they are impressed. Remember, they come from the country and this is the big city, and it is THE city for Jews. They walk down the streets with their mouths hanging open staring up at the grand buildings and there were none as grand as the Temple. This Temple was built by Herod the Great and even though those of us who read the Bible remember Herod as a horrible and violent tyrant, history remembers him as a great builder. He built the Temple of which the “Wailing Wall” remains in Jerusalem today.

“Teacher, look at these huge stones, these great buildings!” the disciples say to Jesus.

Jesus is not very impressed. He even prophesies that these very stones, this great building, will be destroyed and pass away. “Not one stone will be left standing on another,” he says.

Inside the impressive Temple are many impressive people. Young, smartly dressed, handsome clerks and assistants hurry down the halls intent on some urgent errand. Here and there you can spot the scribes and perhaps some of the Sadducees themselves, in their long, flowing robes walking to another important meeting while one of their assistants briefs them on what to expect when they get to the meeting. “Right over there those goes one of the famous Sadducees, one that we usually read about in the papers or see giving sound bytes on TV. He looks taller on TV. I wonder if he would give me his autograph?”

Jesus is not very impressed. “Beware of these scribes who like to walk about

in long robes and receive honor in public.”

Then Jesus seats himself and the disciples “opposite the treasury,” just across from where people are filing by and offering their gifts of money for the work of the Temple. According to one of the travel brochures, this was one of the best places to sit and see “who’s who” in the city. Jesus was able to get a great seat to watch the rich and powerful and the handsome and influential leaders of Jerusalem as they came by, not dropping off checks – remember this is before checks – but big bags, heavy, loud bags of money in the treasury. Occasionally, one of the wealthiest people came by with his assistants carrying large bags of money which he would then, with gravity and ceremony, take from them and then personally drop into the treasury. Everyone sitting nearby would whisper and gasp in admiration.

Back in the 1960's at Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, NC, Warren Carr was the pastor. Carr was outspoken on race matters and a leader in trying to overturn racial segregation in the city. The wealthiest member of the church, and the biggest giver to the church, was a Mr. Goody, the owner of Goody’s Headache Powder, and he did not like Warren Carr’s involvement on racial matters and he detested it every time Carr preached on race. Mr. Goody sat in a rather prominent place on the second row. At Watts Street, like here, the offering followed the sermon and every time Warren Carr preached on race, and while the ushers came forward to receive the offering, Mr. Goody would hold up high his check and tear it in half, signaling his disapproval of the sermon. To give Warren Carr credit, he kept on preaching and working on race during difficult times.

Everyone noticed Mr. Goody. And everyone noticed the big givers to the Temple treasury. Of course, these large givers, though they give the greatest amount, rarely give the greatest percentage of their income. Their \$50,000 gift is only 1 percent of their income whereas someone else's \$100 is a much greater percentage.

Most of us give something off of the top. Many churches are in a budgetary crisis because their major givers give off of the top, which means they give from their stock dividends and since the stock market is down right now, these folks feel like they are in crisis and have quit giving to their churches.

Well, while everyone was impressed with the big givers. Jesus was not. And while everyone else was paying attention to the ones with the big bags of money, Jesus was paying attention to someone else. Jesus points his disciples' attention toward a stooped, older woman, nearly hidden by the flowing robes of the rich and powerful as they dropped off their bags of money. Two copper coins are all that she has to give and she gives it all. And she is the one whom Jesus notices.

Jesus pays attention to the ones that most of this world misses and overlooks. You need to hear this. Sometimes we think God is paying attention only when we are successful and happy and well. And therefore, we think that when things are not going well, either God is not paying attention or God is taking away his blessings from us. These assumptions are not true. God notices the poor, the weak, the marginalized. God pays attention to those who are at their lowest, who are defeated and struggling and overlooked by everyone else. God notices and rejoices

when things are good in our lives. But God especially notices and grieves with us when things are not. And God most clearly notices, listens to, and watches over those very folk whom no one else notices and listens to and watches. These rich and powerful get their tax cuts; this poor widow has the Incarnate Son of the God of the Universe watching her and praising her.

We stress proportionate giving around here. Give a percentage. We want you to learn to tithe, which is 10%. And we learn that tithing is the minimum level of giving. The Bible will talk about our “tithes and offerings,” which means your tithe and then everything on top of that. Next week is what we call “Tithe Sunday” where we encourage everyone to try to give at least 10 % of their income and use the Sunday as the time to make a new commitment to God and to God’s church about how to increase how much you give. Some of you are learning how to increase from say, 2% to 4% to 6% each year and now, after several years in this church, you are giving 10 or 12 %. If everyone tithed in this church we could probably double our budget.

This is good and this is how we learn how to give and learn how to trust God more and more. Nevertheless, the standard that Jesus puts before us on that day at the Temple, is not 10% but 100%, everything. We sang a few minutes ago, “I Surrender All” not “I Surrender 10%.” The One who commanded us to love God with all of our soul, mind, heart, and strength, is most impressed that this woman gave all.

God, who made heaven and earth, and each of us, has given us all, every

single thing we love and cherish in life, all that makes life good and worth living – all. So the question ought not to be, “How much ought I give to God from what I have?” but rather, “How much, of all that God has given me, ought I keep for myself?”

These are hard questions and they go right to heart of our lives. Where we spend our money and where we spend our time tells us a whole lot about what is truly important to us. What are the priorities in our lives? – look at our budgets and you can find out. What are the priorities in this country? – look at the federal budget and you can find out. The same is true of our congregation. In our own congregation, we are moving closer and closer to giving at least 10% of our budget to missions. This year the proposal is 8%. By next year, we hope to be at 10%.

With Jesus pointing our attention to this poor woman who gave everything she had, we might tend to be intimidated or worse, dismiss this whole thing. I hope not. There is too much riding on this and I’m not talking simply about whether you tithe to the church or not. I am talking about whether you and I learn to live our lives out of gratitude to God or out of a miserly sense of what God or life has not given us. I am convinced that this poor woman gave out of sense of gratitude to God. You don’t give everything you have from being miserly in life. You give everything you have because you love God and you are grateful for all of the good gifts that he has given you. This woman gives out of gratitude to the extravagant grace of God. Let’s pay attention to her.

Secondly, this woman apparently gave with the faith in God that God would

provide. You don't give everything to God if you don't believe that God will take care of you.

A friend of mine who has been the associate pastor of a large church told me that their congregation hired a professional church fund-raising firm to come in and do a study on the giving in their church and then lead them in a major fund-raising campaign. At the initial meeting, the professional fund-raiser talked to the church and listened to the congregation. The pastor told the fund-raiser, "You have to understand we are a church that has a high percentage of older people, mostly widows on fixed incomes. So we really can't expect to raise too much money."

The fund-raiser asked to see a list of the church's givers. He took the list back with him to analyze.

The next meeting the fund-raiser announced that he had completed his analysis of the giving patterns of the church. He said that most of the top 50 contributors are 'widows on fixed incomes.' He said that according to his study that those widows on fixed incomes pay about 60 percent of this congregation's annual budget. He went on, "I'd say that if you want to improve the giving in this congregation, you need to talk to those women first, find out why they give, then try to infect the rest of the congregation with the faith of these 'widows on fixed incomes.'"

Jesus paid attention to this poor woman who gave everything. So should we. Yes, she challenges us right where we don't like to be challenged – around the

issue of our Christian life and money. But she also encourages us and calls us to live in the good grace of God and give out of that same grace. And to live by a wonderful faith in this God.

Austin Heights Baptist Church might be right or wrong about some things and we might be good or bad about other things. But one thing for sure, is that we are rarely dull. We are not boring. One reason why is because there are some of you who want to live like this elderly woman in this story. You want to stick your neck out and give extravagantly and live generously. You are not there yet, but you want to live like this woman who gives everything and trusts God for everything. Folks, living like that is never boring!

Thanks be to God! Amen.