

“Out of her poverty”
Matthew 6:24-34
Mark 12:38-44
10/12/08
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I was talking to one of my fellow physicians this week in the dining room, one who hoped to retire soon. I asked, "Does what happened in Wall Street this week bother you?" "Who me?" he replied, "I sleep like a baby! Every two hours I wake up and cry!"

An American history teacher, lecturing the class on the Puritans, asked: "What sort of people were punished in the stocks?" To which a small voice from the back of the room responded: "The small investor."

No subject has dominated the headlines over the past several months any more than the question of the economy. Inflation, stock market, and unemployment seem to be on everyone's mind. Many of us think the stock market crash had nothing to do with us. But do you remember the story that was popular a year or so ago about a pollster taking a survey of how much of people's income goes to different kinds of spending? The person being interviewed said, "I spend 40 percent of my income on housing, 20 percent on clothing, 40 percent on food, and 20 percent on transportation and amusement." The pollster said, "But sir, that adds up to 120 percent." The reply was, "I knew that!"

Someone from Seattle, Washington, writes that, "For the past few years, my watch word has been: I came, I saw, I bought! Or, as they say in Latin, 'Veni, Vidi, VISA!'"

Who caused the stock market problems? It is time to stop looking for scape-goats. You and I caused them. But Jesus tells us to be not afraid, and to focus not on Wall Street but on God.

Scene 1 He sat down opposite the treasury and watched to crowd

Mammon is not a God. It can be a God, but the word mammon is the Aramaic word for possessions. A contemporary phrase might be "The almighty dollar." There is no pagan god whose name is mammon. Jesus does not demonize mammon. Jesus does not demonize money. Our lives, and our possessions, can be focused on glorying God. Or can be focused on glorifying ourselves. We get to choose.

God is interested in our check books. I tell Sandy, our treasurer, that what someone gives to our church is between them and God, that I do not want to know. But do not be misled, God watches the offering plate. God looks at your check book. How do I know this?

Today's scripture says Jesus sits beside what is translated as "treasury." Scholars think this is the word for the equivalent of one of 13 offering boxes in the women's court in the Temple. It was an upside down horn, a shofar, the narrow end into which mammon is placed, the larger end on the floor.

People 2000 years ago, and today, think of giving to the church and to charities as an option. The money for charities coming out of surplus after personal expenses. Necessary personal expenses including clothes, food, and yes, entertainment and toys. We plan to be more charitable in the future.

But Jesus, and God, watch what we put in the offering plate. God is interested in our check books.

Scene 2 The scribes put in large sums, and the poor put in mites

Jesus contrasts the widow's contribution with that of the scribe's. We assume the scribe was wealthy. Was rich in mammon. Some of you are thinking, well I am not rich. Let me tell you what some folks think defines rich. "You're rich when you can throw away a pair of pantyhose just because it has a large hole in it." "You're rich when you can have four people to dinner and don't have to wash forks between the main course and dessert." "You're rich when your television set has all the knobs on it."

Contrast the widow's priorities with that of modern day culture. A state trooper found a Yuppie by the roadside next to a demolished car, crying, "My fancy car! I've lost my car!" The trooper says, "Never mind the car. You've lost your left arm!" The Yuppie looks down, and cried, "My Rolex! I've lost my Rolex!"

Who can ever forget comedian Jack Benny and his attachment to money? A hold-up man demands, "Your money or your life!" Jack, with hand to cheek after a long pause: "I'm thinking. I'm thinking!"

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "If a man owns land, the land owns him."

To translate the Greek as "poor widow" is too weak. A "destitute widow" is more accurate. The lepta was the smallest coinage available, possibly minted in Palestine instead of in Rome. Two lepton were one sixty-fourth of a laborer's daily wage. We talked about a denarius last week with Caesar's head on it. Two lepton, a widow's mite, is one sixty fourth of a denarius. She might have kept one of the coins, but did not. Out of her poverty, she gave her whole life. Jesus might have scolded her for lack of discretion in giving everything she has. Instead he praises her highly.

But I do not think Jesus is criticizing large gifts and romanticizing small ones.

Scene 3 The scribes put in a percentage of their abundance, the widow put in her whole life

The scribes were outwardly generous but inwardly meager. The widow was outwardly meager and inwardly generous. The barrenness of the scribes is contrasted with the true religion of the widows. The scribes are not really endangering their resources to support God's work, and the widow is. With John the Baptizer and Jesus, the widow is one of only three people in Mark's Gospel who are said to give their whole lives. Jesus asks his disciples to notice the complete surrender and trust in God that the widow demonstrates. Jesus says despise her not, she has offered her whole life.

A few years ago there was a terrible earthquake in Alaska. Anchorage was devastated. A number of people wrote to the governor and demanded that he do certain things for them. They outlined the suffering that they had endured and demanded that the state take responsibility. Later the governor appeared on television and reported that, among all the demands, he had received a letter from a boy who had written on a 3 X 5 card and had taped to it two nickels. The boy had written these words: "Use this wherever it is needed. If you need more, let me know."

Scribes who are proud and greedy. A widow who is humble and generous. A scribe who after giving a tenth of his resources is still wealthy in his possessions. And a widow who after her contribution has nothing except her trust in God. A scribe who gives from his surplus. And a widow who gives her whole life, who gives away everything but her trust in God. A widow's story that anticipates Jesus' own sacrifice of his life. Her gift foreshadows the one Jesus is about to make, his very life. This poor widow reminds of the one who, "though he was rich, yet for our sake became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich." 2 Cor 8:9.

Conclusion

Jesus tells us today that a show of outward piety has no significance. It is the inner disposition of the mind that God wants. God does not want a tenth of your income, as if mammon were what is valuable to God. God wants all of you, your mammon and your souls. All of you. A whole hearted self-giving that transcends dollars and cents.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's people say ...