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“Unexpected Sources of Encouragement”

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Mark 12:41-44; Romans 12:1-13

It must be the season of Stewardship—all the scripture texts are about money these days! As Presbyterians, we remain fairly low-key about raising the budget and making a pledge. Financial and theological language is employed to make the approach more dignified, to appeal to the intellect, and by all means to keep it private.

Do you know that in some religious communities, the giving of tithes and offerings is a public affair? Peoples’ pledges are published and announced for all to know. When the day comes for the annual campaign, the church service doesn’t end until the budget is met. The hat can get passed several times if not enough is raised!

Such approaches would never work here, of course. We are too sophisticated for that.

During Jesus’s day, giving was a public affair. As a matter of fact, it was such a spectacle that people gathered at the Temple to watch. Even Jesus was drawn to come and watch, according to our gospel text. Jesus posted himself across the courtyard from the collection box to watch with his disciples.

Every family was expected to give, and sometime during the year, a representative from each family throughout the region of Judea would make a trip to the Temple with the family’s offering.

The collection boxes were placed in an area near the Temple where the general public was welcome—you didn't have to be especially religious to contribute. Women and children were permitted. No restrictions were imposed based on one's station in life or profession. When it comes to receiving money, most religious institutions are very open and accepting and inclusive.

The variety of people bringing gifts must have been part of the attraction. They ran the spectrum: urbanites and farmers, old and young, the rich and the not-so-well-to-do, the socialite and the pariah.

Another part of the spectacle must have been the way they gave. I'm sure some came with a great retinue and made their gift with a remarkable flourish, making sure each coin sounded loudly as it fell into the treasury. Some gave with gratitude; others gave with attitude, grumbling all the while, muttering something about the overpaid priests and the under-attended services.

I imagine the audience to the spectacle of giving at the Temple was another source of amusement. If Jesus showed up, certainly others also came to watch. Perhaps they cheered when great sums were deposited into the treasury. They may have booed when a tax collector brought his ill-gotten wealth.

Maybe they held up placards with numbers from one to ten judging the style by which the gift was given. It held all the possibilities for a modern day reality show right there at the Temple treasury.

In those days, the head of the house would bring the tithe, or someone designated by the head of the house. Typically that was the patriarch or one of the older sons of the family. Carrying a substantial sum of money through an urban area or down isolated country roads brought risk of robbery, and if one traveled far, that risk increased. A caravan of travelers might come together since greater numbers afforded greater security.

A woman would come only if she was widowed and had no sons to send on this errand. In such a case, a widow with no sons was truly one of the poorest of the

poor. Her ability to earn a living was quite limited, and she would have no one on which to depend for support. A widow was vulnerable to the whims of others—at times, she could be close to starvation.

The Torah included instructions for the Jewish community to support such impoverished people. The poor were to be supported by the community and protected from oppression and abuse. The poor would be recipients of assistance, not the ones giving it.

Jesus came to watch, and of course, the disciples followed along. They observed the parade of givers.

And then Jesus saw it. He looked around at his disciples, but no one else seemed to notice. It was the biggest gift of the day, yet it went unheralded. No one made a fuss. It would have been missed if Jesus hadn't pointed it out. It was larger than any of the great sums contributed earlier. It was more significant than all the other gifts put together.

Would it fund the benevolence budget for a month? Or for a year? Oh, it was much bigger than that. Would it finance the entire annual budget?

“Did you see that?” Jesus exclaimed to his disciples.

“What? What are you talking about? All we saw was an old woman dropping in two tiny coins that don't amount to a penny.”

“Don't you get it?” questioned Jesus. “The widow in her financial distress possesses only two of the smallest coins, and she gave *both* of them. She could have kept one for herself, but she gave both.”

The disciples didn't get it.

“You see,” Jesus went on, “all the others contributed out of their abundance what they can easily spare. Those gifts require no sacrifice. But this woman gave all of

the little she had. She has entrusted her very life to God. And that kind of reliance is the biggest and best gift that a person can give to God.”

Disciples today still don’t get it. I know I don’t.

The church hopes for big givers. The spectacle of people giving out of their abundance might make us cheer, and the church is always trying to cajole its members to let go of a little more.

However, we do not anticipate sacrificial givers. I don’t think we really want them. They frighten us. Would we encourage folks to be so imprudent as to give it all away? We are responsible Presbyterians and God forbid that we should become too serious about God.

In less than two weeks, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove will address this congregation at the annual Stewardship Dinner. Jonathan and his wife Leah, who are white, moved to Durham, bought a house in a black neighborhood and opened the doors for anyone who needed a place to stay. *Anyone*. They did it because they took seriously the words of Jesus: “When I was a stranger, you welcomed me.”

We like people to do grand things, but folks like Jonathan and Leah and the widow of the Temple put us off.

Jesus did not condemn the big givers. He did not point out their possible hypocrisies or challenge their lack of faith or bemoan their motivation for giving the offering. Jesus did not critique the institution to which they gave. It may have been inefficient or ineffective; it certainly wasn’t destined to survive much longer in the political climate of that day. As a matter of fact, when the disciples left the Temple that day, Jesus predicted its destruction.

The point was the contrast—those who give generously and the one who gives all. As it turns out, the amount isn’t significant; it’s the percentage: 100%.

It would be so simple to now turn this story to us and ask us to give ourselves totally to God's work. And I may get to that yet! But the story of the widow's gift, I believe, has a more remarkable role in the ministry of Jesus.

The story of the widow's gift is unique in the Gospels. This is not a story Jesus tells to his disciples, such as a parable, in order to teach a lesson. It wasn't even an encounter between the woman and Jesus. There was no interaction: Jesus is depicted as a passive observer, and the incident seems to be as much a surprise to him as it is to anyone.

Notice: the woman receives no gift, no redemption, no cure, no deliverance from her situation. She is provided no comfort, no promise, no hope. She was a poor widow at the beginning of the story and she was a penniless widow at the end of the story.

So what is the point?

I believe that the widow's faith of entrusting her entire being to God provided encouragement for Jesus.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus had an encounter with Satan in the wilderness. It was there that Jesus confirmed the direction and course and focus of his ministry. He would entrust himself to God's care and not to some political accommodation or expediency. When the temptation experience ended, Scripture declares: "Angels ministered to him" (Mark 1:13).

Jesus is now at the end of his ministry. He had poured himself into his disciples, he had taught and healed many, he had battled the principalities of this world, and now he was facing certain death. Had Jesus chosen the right path? Did it accomplish what he intended and hoped?

And in watching the widow cast her coins into the treasury, Jesus had his answer. Her example animated him. The widow remained faithful in giving herself to God's care regardless of her circumstances. Jesus once again affirmed this as his path as well.

It was as though another ministering angel came to him at the conclusion of his ministry: it was in the form of a widow casting her coins into the offering plate.

Jesus was now ready to move on toward the cross. Jesus would now abandon himself to God's care regardless of the outcome.

Who would imagine that a poor widow contributing a little bit of nothing to the Temple treasury could have such an impact?

Yet acts of faith and love and truth make an impact. They make an impact on us and on others.

A father pays for his two small children to enter an amusement park. The price for children under 6 is a couple bucks cheaper than older children. His kids are 6 and 7, so he pays the more expensive admission. The guy at the ticket booth says, "Why didn't you say they were both under 6? No one would have known the difference, and you would have saved money." And the father replies, "My children would have known the difference."

Mother Teresa said, "There are many people who can do big things, but there are very few people who will do the small things."

When a rabbi was asked why people had such a difficult time finding God, he said, "They are not willing to look that low."

Small acts of the faith and love and truth make an impact.

A child says, "I have enough. I want to give to someone who needs this more."

A busy woman shows up at the house of a neighbor with a hug and a cake.

A man puts his hand on the shoulder of a friend, saying "I'll pray for you," and then over the course of the next couple of weeks, he does pray.

A retired business man tutors children who are at risk. “It’s a good use of my time,” he remarks modestly. “I get more out of it than I give.”

The Apostle Paul wrote, “Not many of us were wise, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth—God chooses what is foolish and weak and lowly—” Why? To show that God is the faithful One.

“When did we see you hungry and feed you, when did we see you thirsty and give you drink?”

It is so easy to become cynical, thinking that how we live doesn’t really matter. But the truth is that faithfulness is contagious. It inspires in others faithfulness.

Jesus Christ and his disciples still find encouragement in those simple acts of faithfulness.

People living out their faith in daily acts of sacrifice and giving. They are not giving in order to get. This is not quid pro quo.

They know all of life belongs to God, and so their giving is an act of faith. Their very being depends upon this God to whom they dedicate their gifts.

The widow never knew the impact of her faithfulness. She never understood the profound contribution she made to the work of God in giving those two coins. She didn’t need to know. When you trust God, there are some things you can let go of.

And that was enough to encourage Jesus.