

23rd Sunday After Pentecost
Text: Mark 12:38-44
Preacher: Vicar Stephanie Kershner

St. Peter's – Lafayette Hill, PA
November 8, 2009

“Two Small Copper Coins”

I'm guessing some of you might have rolled your eyes a little bit when you heard the gospel reading for today. Maybe some of you let out a little sigh or a slight groan. And maybe some of you decided to mentally check out as soon as you saw what the text was for today. Maybe you're writing your grocery list or thinking about all of the things you need to accomplish this week. I can't say I blame you. And if I were sitting in the pew this morning I would probably be doing the same thing. This text from Mark seems to be about money at first glance. And I'm sure many of you have heard many sermons about money that have been based on this text and the unselfish, total faithful giving of the widow. Here at St. Peter's we are in the middle of our stewardship campaign. But, I'm not going to stand up here and tell you all how you should be giving money to the church. You have heard from many wonderful leaders over the past few weeks about why St. Peter's needs money. You know we need money to function as a place of worship. You know we need money in order to minister to others outside of this congregation. We have all been battered by the economy over the past couple of years. Some of us have lost our jobs. Some of us have lost money in our investments. Some of us have lost our homes. I'm not going to stand up here and tell you not to worry. I'm not going to tell you just to have faith and that God will provide. Just have faith and everything will work out. Because I know that is much more easily said than done. So, I invite you all to relax and to listen because I'm not going to talk about money this morning.

In this story of the widow's mite, I don't believe that Jesus wanted us to focus on the two copper coins that the widow put into the treasury. If you read Chapter 11, which precedes our text for today, and chapter 13 which follows our text for today, Jesus is angry with how the temple is being used and what the temple authorities are teaching and practicing.

In Mark Chapter 11, it says: “Then he came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. Jesus was teaching and saying, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.”

And then, all of Mark Chapter 13, the whole thing is Jesus prophesying about the destruction of the Temple and the temple officials. Chapter 13 begins by saying: “As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Look teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!’ Then Jesus asked him, ‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’”

Sandwiched in between these two chapters is today's reading. And in today's reading there are two characters: the scribes and the widow. It is important for us to understand the roles of these two characters during the time of Jesus.

Scribes were generally people who could read and write. But, they were more than copyists. The title "scribe" became synonymous with being educated. Some scribes were legal experts, some were biblical experts, and some were both. In today's text they are literally described as: wanting to walk in long robes, wanting to be greeted in the market places, wanting the first seats in the Temple, wanting the first places at the dinners, devouring the houses of widows, and praying for a long time in the Temple just for show. Elsewhere in Mark, scribes are the ones who argue with Jesus and his disciples, they reject Jesus, they seek to arrest and kill him, and they mock Jesus on the cross. These were powerful people in the community. Mark, and Jesus, for that matter, do not paint a beautiful picture when they talk about scribes.

The widow on the other hand had no power. Becoming a widow was the fate most feared by a woman. Widows were people with no means of support. They didn't own property. They didn't usually have any way to earn money. They were people on welfare, living off handouts from society or family. When a woman's husband died, she could go back to her own family – if they could afford it or, she would have to stay with her husband's family where she would be treated like an unwelcomed burden. The widows in society were considered to be non-persons. They didn't matter. They were nothing.

When someone died, the scribes would swoop in to help manage the person's estate. All of the estate documents were kept at the Temple because the scribes were the ones who could read and write the documents themselves. Not only did the Temple and the scribes charge a fee for these services but they would take whatever was left over and distribute most of it amongst themselves leaving the widow with hardly anything. These same scribes would then sit in the Temple and teach that everyone needed to contribute to the Temple's treasury on a regular basis. Even the poor widow.

In those days, when someone brought their offering to the Temple, they were required to announce how much they were putting in to the treasury. Imagine how that widow felt as she watched the scribes, dressed in their finest, boast about how much they were putting in to the treasury. Imagine how she felt waiting for her turn to announce her meager amount. Imagine how that poor widow must have felt announcing that she was putting in two copper coins – two copper coins that didn't even equal one cent. You think doing a stewardship campaign is rough? What if you had to announce how much money you were putting in the offering plate every Sunday?

The Temple and the scribes were not only devouring the resources of the poor, but they pushed the outcasts of society even further to the perimeter by forcing embarrassment on them in such ways. Jesus, fiercely opposed this. He did not call his disciples over to him to point out the widow because of her sacrifice. Jesus did not lift her up or tell his disciples to emulate her. This widow was a representation of the on-going, dehumanizing exploitation of the poor by the Temple authorities.

There was no separation of the spiritual life and the corporate life in the days of Jesus. The two were deeply intermeshed. They were so tightly knit together that there was no distinction between the two. In contemporary society we have moved away from this. We have separate lives: our spiritual life and our work life. On some levels this is good. However, what would our lives be like if instead of only tending to our spiritual lives on Sunday, we carried what we experience here together in worship into activities outside of this space, outside of this sanctuary?

And how we do that may be different for each one of us. Today, I would like to ask you all to do something very specific. As the holidays approach please research and contemplate what you're putting your money and time into. Read labels. Purchase gifts made by companies that don't practice employing children or other oppressed people and then pay them miniscule wages for long hours. Buy coffees and teas that are fair trade approved. Buy produce that is local. And yes, I know that this may mean that there aren't as many gifts underneath the Christmas tree this year. Or there may not be as much food on the table on Thanksgiving Day. These are things we can do to make sure we are not exploiting other people like the scribes in the Temple did. Let's remember to not separate ourselves into different containers depending on what day it is, or where we're going, or what we're doing, or who we're with. If we bring our whole selves, our spiritual selves and our corporate selves, to every aspect of life then we will truly be able to grow as people of faith. Amen.