

“Your Money or Your Life”¹

I.

Do you ever show up for church on a Sunday and suspect that this whole thing is rigged? I wouldn't blame if you felt that way this morning. Here it is the season of stewardship, when we are talking about “The Joy of Generosity,” urging you to prayerfully consider your 2010 pledge to Plymouth Church. And the lectionary *just happens*, you know, by *sheer coincidence*, to serve up the story of the widow's mite: a destitute woman gives all that she has—every red cent—to the service of God in the temple. Jesus sees it and commends her for such an extravagant gift. As texts for stewardship sermons go, this looks like a slam dunk. The widow gave all that *she* had, so...what are *you* waiting for?

And it's great for me, because it is so very easy. The sermon practically writes itself. You start out depicting the sorry state of this widow, really crank up the pathos. Her late husband was a bum. He left her with little more than the clothes on her back. Her kids all live out of state and rarely even think to call her. She gets by on a fixed income and dreams of what used to be.

But her one consolation, the one bright spot in all her miserable little life, is worship at the Jerusalem temple. She gets there as often as she possibly can; she gives as much money as she can possibly give. And while it may not look like much of a life to us, Jesus knows all about her suffering, all about her sacrifice. And Jesus smiles on what she has done.

Don't you want Jesus to smile on you?

See how easy that was? I didn't even break a sweat! In the stewardship season, any preacher wielding this particular text should be considered armed and dangerous. It's the Sunday morning stick-up: your money or your life.

Or at least that is what I used to think. And that was pretty much the sermon I expected to preach this morning. But now I'm not so sure. The more closely I read this story, the less simple it seems. Clearly Jesus is after something, but I think it may be more than the contents of our checking accounts.

This is not just about your money. This is about your life.

II.

It's getting late in the Gospel of Mark. The time grows short. Our text takes up the story of Jesus just a few short days before the cross. So much has already happened in the scant space of this week. It began with Jesus riding triumphantly into town and raising a ruckus in the Temple, driving out the moneychangers and demanding justice in the house of God.

Since then, Jesus has endured a series of cross-examinations from friends and foes alike. In our reading last week, he dealt with the greatest commandment, or, rather, commandments: “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength,*” and, “*you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” The scribe who asked Jesus about this agreed with his answer and then suggested that love of God and neighbor means more than all the trappings of institutional religion, “*than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.*” And Jesus did not disagree.

Our text for today comes closely on the heels of that conversation. It falls into two distinct sections. The first part proves fairly easy to understand; the second...not so much.

In the first section, Jesus warns the people to watch out for, well, me –or, at least, people

in my line of work: the religious professionals, called “scribes” in Jesus’ day, called “ministers” and “pastors” and “priests” in our own. None of what Jesus says here sounds surprising to us; we have seen them come and go: Jimmy Swaggert, Jim and Tammy Fae Baker, Robert Tilton, Ted Haggard, etc, etc, etc. We expect hypocrisy from religious big shots.

But to the first people who heard Jesus speak these words, this is severe and shocking stuff. Everyone reveres and respects the scribes, who give themselves to the study of Torah, to the full-time pursuit of holy things.² But Jesus rips right into them: “Watch out for the scribes! They love to walk around in fancy long robes, to be greeted with respect in the marketplace, to have the best seats at worship and the best tables at restaurants. They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

It is crystal clear: The religious elite are vain and privileged and pompous, long-winded and hard-hearted. But then there is that one line: *They devour widows’ houses*. Short, suggestive but not really developed. What is Jesus trying to say here?

Well, that brings us to the *second* section of our text. Jesus takes a seat across from the treasury and watches people putting their money into the cash box for the support and maintenance of the Jerusalem temple –kind of a first century capital campaign.³ The rich people parade up to the box to ostentatiously offer their gifts of appreciated stock and piles of gold coins. But then along comes a poor widow, dressed in little more than rags. She puts in two small copper coins, worth about a penny -1/64th of an average day’s wages, mere pocket change.⁴ And Jesus is so moved by this moment that he summons his disciples and says to them, “*Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.*”

This part of the text seems harder to understand. It kind of reminds me of e-mail. Have you ever noticed just how difficult it can be to tell someone’s intended tone in an e-mail? Was that: “*Everything’s fine, I’m great,*” or: “*Everything’s fine, I’m great.*” Sincerity or sarcasm? How do we know? Everything depends on the tone of Jesus’ voice.

We usually read this story as if Jesus commends the impoverished widow: She put in all that she had. Isn’t that great? Don’t you want to be like her? But it may be a little more complicated than that. I think Jesus admires this widow. I think he appreciates her selfless act of generosity.⁵ But I also sense something else in his tone: sadness, perhaps. Maybe even a little anger –not at the widow, but at those who will benefit from her gift, the corrupt religious establishment that really does not deserve such devotion. They encouraged her to cash in her life’s savings for the sake of their big shiny temple. So Jesus marvels at her faith, even as he weeps for her exploitation.

But remember: that is what the scribes do. “*They devour widows’ houses.*” The signed over Social Security check. The lavish dinner on the widow’s dime. This magnificent temple, built on the backs of the oppressed.

They devour widows’ houses. Jesus knows it when he sees it.

III.

So I think Samuel Johnson may have had it wrong. Patriotism? No. *Religion* is the last refuge of a scoundrel, the oldest ally of injustice.

Don’t believe me? Just read the Bible some time. People who have not read the Bible—or who haven’t read much of it, anyway—often regard it as some sort of *religious* book, extolling the many virtues of religion. But those who have actually read it know better. Scripture

always reserves its harshest words of judgment for religious leaders and religious institutions. They have a habit of provoking the indignation of God. Jesus stands here in a long line of prophets who exposed injustice in the house of God, who called out those who would, in the name of God, exploit and oppress the orphan and the widow. Sometimes—too many times—religion makes God sick.

Contrary to what you may have heard, God is not in the business of defending or supporting or propping up organized religion. God has got other priorities. As the scribe said to Jesus last week: loving God and loving neighbor matters far more to God than all the routines and rituals and regular monthly board meetings ever devised by the religious-industrial complex. God demands justice. And whenever religion interferes with justice, it falls under the judgment of God.

They devour widows' houses. God sees it. God knows all about it. And God will not allow it to stand.

IV.

I guess all of this raises some fairly obvious questions: What are we doing here? Why do we still show up for church? If God desires mercy and not sacrifice, if God loves justice more than God loves stained glass and organ music, why do any of us even bother? And why in the world would God ever bother with any of us?

Good questions. If we never even think to ask these questions, we probably do not deserve to call ourselves followers of Jesus. But these questions do have an answer: If the Bible is any indication, God has a very peculiar sense of humor. And while God could, of course, simply abolish religion outright, God would much rather mess with it; God would much rather make religion into an instrument of justice. So God goes out and finds some religious people—Israel, the church, people like that—and God goes to work on them: tries to transform them from the inside out, tries to teach them to take the side of the orphan and the widow, tries to turn them into a people who can learn and live out the love and the justice of God. Because, let's face it: God can do that with religious people, God can do that with just about anybody.

I don't know why, exactly, God decides to do things this way. She just finds it amusing. And by the grace of God, we get to be in on the joke.

V.

But does any of this actually have anything to do with pledging to Plymouth Church? Anything at all? I think it does, and so I would like to close this sermon with two brief observations.

First, if all you have to put in the offering plate this morning is all you have to live on, please, keep your money. It's bad enough that I have to wear this long robe and sit in that nice seat. I really don't need exploitation of the poor on my conscience.

But second, I know that most of you are not in that position. So consider this: if you feel the Spirit stirring in *you* and messing with *you* this morning—if you are starting to suspect that this thing *is* rigged, that maybe *you* are in on the joke—how can you not give? How can you not offer something of yourself to the God who has such plans for you? How can you hold yourself back from the strange and wonderful work of God's Spirit in this place?

It's like I said before: This is not about your money. This is about your life.

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Notes

¹ Even more than usual, this sermon was considerably improved by the insights of others. My thanks to Angie, David, Jeanette, Stephanie and the participants in the Wednesday Morning Bible Study for making this sermon better than it otherwise would have been.

² André Resner Jr. drives home the point that Jesus' critique would have seemed shocking to his first audience. There are some things one simply does not say; some groups one simply does not criticize. *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts*. The Third Readings: The Gospels. Edited by Roger E. Van Harn. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), pp.231-235

³ This is the key question for the entire sermon: What is the purpose of the "treasury" Is it for the relief of the poor? If so, this text can be read—as it so often is—in sentimental and moralistic terms, lifting up the widow's gift as a selfless act of devotion to God. This interpretation is advanced, for example, by Amy Jill-Levine, who identifies the "treasury" as the *tzedakah* or "charity box." By giving to the poor, the widow becomes an exemplar of Jewish piety. *The Access Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Edited by Gail R. O'Day and David Peterson. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.71. But there are a number of problems with this reading. First of all, in every other occurrence of *gadzophulakeiov*—the word translated here as "treasury"—the reference is not to acts of charity but rather to gifts specified for the building and maintenance of the temple (e.g., in the LXX see Joshua 6.19, I Chronicles 29.8, Ezra 6.4, Daniel 1.2, Hosea 13.15, Zechariah 11.13). Second, this reading completely disregards the larger context within which the story occurs. This section of Mark's Gospel includes extended scenes of Jesus criticizing the corruption of the Temple establishment -he drives out the money-changers in 11.15-17, and, in the very next passage (chapter 13), talks at length about the Temple's impending destruction as a sign of the judgment of God. Given the extremely dim view that Jesus takes of the Temple in Mark's Gospel, it makes much more sense to see this passage as part of the larger anti-Temple polemic. But if you don't want to take my word for it, see the aforementioned work of André Resner Jr. and also *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV –Year B*. Edited by Walter Brueggemann et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), pp. 576-585.

⁴ So says C. Clifton Black of Princeton Theological Seminary. See his notes in *The Harper Collins Study Bible*. (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), p.1943.

⁵ It is worth noting, as Calvin does, that the story also suggests God honors the motive in giving, even if the recipient of the gift is suspect. As readers of the text, we should be sophisticated enough to commend the widow's faith and condemn her exploitation at the same time. *Harmony of the Evangelists*, Volume III. Translated by The Rev. William Pringle. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), pp.113-114.