

Children

Object: a stapler and two pieces of paper.

Good morning, boys and girls. Today is a good day for us to be together. I like things to be together. Do you know what I mean? For instance, I like to sit down at a table where the knife and the fork and the spoon are beside the plate and not on the cupboard or on a chair. They belong with the plate. I feel the same way about a coat and hat. I like to see the coat and the hat where they belong on a person and not wrapped around the feet or hanging on a hook.

Did you know that God is like that also? He likes things to be where they belong and not somewhere else. For instance, God had a plan for all of his people in this world and it was that they would live here on earth with him and be very happy. But the people didn't seem to like God's plan and they decided that they would like to try out their own plan and be like God. They thought that they knew as much and could do as much as God could do, so they told God that they were going to do it their own way. Well, you can guess what happened. Things really got in a mess and pretty soon the people on earth were very sorry that they had decided to try to live without God. Lucky for the people, God did not give up on them, for when they asked for help he was right there waiting. Now God tried a lot of things to help the people come back and live right with him, but they were so used to fighting with each other doing things wrong that it didn't seem to make any difference. He gave them the Ten Commandments and they tried for a while, but it just didn't seem to work. God sent prophets and named special men kings but they still seemed to only want to do things their own way. Finally, God had a wonderful plan that he knew would work. I want to show you that plan with my friend Stanley Stapler. Stanley had two pieces of paper that he wanted to bring together, so he just sent a staple out that fixed these two pieces of paper in such a way that they could not come loose. The staple holds them together, and the two pieces of paper get along just fine.

Well, that is the way that God did it. He sent his son Jesus into the world just as Stanley sent the staple. And sure enough, God brought us together. The Bible calls Jesus the mediator. It is Jesus who brings us together and makes us part of God's world again. Now, we don't have to worry because God's plan works so well that we can go to God anytime and pray in the name of Jesus. Just like the staple brings two pieces of paper together, so Jesus brings God and boys and girls together. So, the next time you see a staple, you will remember that it is a mediator just as Jesus is your mediator. A staple can only bring paper together, but Jesus can bring you and God together.

I

In the first reading today and in the Gospel reading we meet two widows who are very similar. Both are common, hard working women. Both are poor. Both put their trust in God rather than in things. Both are rewarded for their faith.

The first widow is a foreigner to the Hebrews. She is from Zarephath, a coastal city on the Mediterranean, northwest of the Kingdom of Israel. Elijah traveled through this land during a famine. As in all famines, the rich complain and the poor starve. The woman was poor. When Elijah met up with her, she was putting her last scraps together before she and her son would die. Imagine her as a starving woman with her child in Africa or Asia, eyes sunken with pain, belly extended. Imagine that desperation had given way to despair and a moribund acceptance of her fate and that of her son. We have all seen pictures of starving women, holding a suffering child. The woman Elijah saw was one of these women. Now, imagine if a total stranger went up to this woman and asked her for food in the name of the Lord. "He's unreasonable," you and I would say. "He needs to take care of himself and leave her alone," you and I would argue. But there was a law of hospitality in scripture that demanded that strangers and foreigners be cared for in their plight. Imagine how deep the woman's faith would have been to trust in God and share the little she had. This is what the woman in the *First Book of Kings* did. God saw her faith, her generosity. She received enough to eat for a full year.

The second widow was the one of the Gospel reading who put two small coins into the Temple treasury. Jesus said that her donation, although it seemed insignificant, was tremendous because she gave all that she had. Her donation was an act of putting complete faith in God to care for her.

While I do not mean this as a criticism, I think it is a universal truth. When a person loses a spouse, it is common to be angry with God. While my wife was sick and suffering for 24 years and institutionalized – not a nice term to describe nursing home care and then a vent unit for 10 of those years. Then she had to die while I was deployed to Kuwait. I was angry with God for all the years she suffered and angry with myself for not being there. I was also angry with God because I missed her and wanted her to still be living. I was so angry that I volunteered to go to Syria with the Marines to a combat zone and to extend my deployment for another year. It took time for me to forgive myself and to forgive God (not that he needed my forgiveness.). But, I think the widow was so generous that she gave of all her means showed that she had forgiven God. Remember there was no social security back then, so she placed herself in the hands of God whom she now knew loved her.

What these widows did is extremely difficult for all of us. No matter how great our faith is, it is extremely difficult to put our total trust in God. There is something within us all that looks for solutions to our problems outside of the realm of faith. Perhaps as rugged individualists we think that we can solve our own problems, conquer all obstacles ourselves. Certainly, we are all tempted to believe that the proper amount of

cash applied in the right places can heal all life's ills. At the same time, I know you will agree that the great fallacy of our age is that money can solve our problems. It is the job of advertisers to convince us that we can buy happiness. The fact is that among those who have been blessed with material success the happiest are those who have no qualms about sharing their wealth.

The radical message of today's readings is that we must place our confidence in God rather than in our material possessions. This is difficult for us to do because it demands our practicing the forgotten virtue of humility. Humility? Yes, humility. Only a humble person recognizes where he or she stands before God. Only a humble person recognizes his or her profound need for God. Only a humble person is certain that the presence of God in his or her life is fundamental to happiness.

The two widows gave from their substance. They put their trust in God shouting with their actions that His presence in their lives was infinitely more important than anything they owned, even more important than everything they owned. They give us the example of ideal Christians, humbly trusting in God to care for them.

Perhaps, some day, you and I will have faith so profound faith that we trust in God as these two widows and Annie trusted in God. But, then again, that is one of the reasons why we go to Church, isn't it? We are here pray for faith.

II

“You are worth your weight in gold!”

We use this phrase to indicate someone who is extremely useful, helpful, or valuable to someone else. It can refer either to a person or to a thing, but we most often use it to refer to a person. The idea behind the phrase is gratitude –that “we” could not manage without that person, because he or she has become so valuable to us and to our process or goal in what he or she is able to accomplish on our behalf.

While we might say this about an old refrigerator that has been working faithfully for over 40 years, likewise a CEO might say the same about a manager, who has saved the company thousands of dollars, or a secretary, whose efficiency makes things run smoothly and easily, saving time and effort. Unfortunately, while the phrase is meant as a compliment, it’s clear that the speaker of the phrase is grateful not for the presence or substance of that person but for what that person brings to the table so to speak. It is gratitude for one’s “usefulness.” It is a kind of self-serving way of expressing appreciation for someone else’s utility.

This kind of utilitarian attitude toward people dominates often in the world of finance, corporate growth, economics, and in general, any bureaucracy, but it’s not the way we like to view people when we think in terms of a faith community.

In fact, just the opposite.

Look at any scripture story, parable, or teaching by Jesus, and you will find a strong reaction to “weighing one’s worth” by one’s deeds or acts. In Jesus’ mission and message, we aren’t “golden” because we are useful, successful, or essential to a project or institution. We are worthy of God’s grace and place in a community of faith no matter who we are or what we are capable of doing, because our worth is not measured but intrinsic to who we are, marked and made in the image of God.

This sense of “value” should have been a no brainer to those of the Jewish faith, given the messages of the Hebrew scriptures, but at the time Jesus was living and teaching, the message had gotten lost, at least lost to those “in charge.”

Last week, we talked about Jesus’ declaration of the Jewish shema, proclaiming love as the central tenant of the faith. This week in Mark 12, we see Jesus railing at the Jewish legal bureaucracy for valuing people not for their “kingdom” worth, but for their “worth in gold.”

This chapter in Mark in fact reads every bit as stark as Luther’s 95 theses. Every paragraph is another blunt socio-religious critique of the Jewish leadership and its current practices:

- Critique of the temple management’s conniving disrespect for the Messiah and God’s true message.
- Critique of temple tax and ultimately of the temple itself, clearly beholden to Caesar.
- Critique of the Sadducees unyielding legalisms and misconstruing of the scriptures.
- Critique of what it means to love one’s neighbor.

- Critique of a biological rather than covenantal view of God's favor for God's people.
- Critique of the arrogance and hypocrisy of the ruling Pharisees and Scribes, who strive for the best for themselves, while ignoring their responsibility to care for the people.
- And in today's scripture, a scathing critique of the Temple management's focus on building Temple wealth by extracting money from those who need their money to live, and still worse, by cloaking this expectation in guilt and devotion.

Still worse? Today, in our own churches, we many times still choose to misinterpret this story of the widow's gift, in order to nudge people into giving money they don't have or to guilt them into increasing their tithes and commitments. We praise the poor woman for giving the only two cents she has to live on, saying to ourselves, isn't her faith great. Look at her sacrifice.

But here's the rub. Jesus was not glorifying the widow in this scripture for her self-sacrificing demeanor. He was harshly and bluntly criticizing the Pharisees and Scribes for taking advantage of her goodness and preying on her faith commitment in order to extract from her the only money she had to live on. Lauded as an act of "great faith," Jesus sees it for what it is –the worst kind of religious abuse, a manipulation of her gentle and vulnerable spirit, using the language of faith to encourage her to deny her own welfare in the name of God. Jesus calls out this act as a wretched act of treachery and evil on behalf of the Temple leadership, whom he declares "devour widows' houses and pray just for show."

Religion does strange things to people. While faith itself makes people vulnerable, those in the ranks of religious institutions tend toward power. And as we all know, power corrupts.

In Jesus' time, the divide between the religious elite and the faithful poor was growing ever greater, and it was clear that the more the elite glorified poverty and declared giving one's last dime as righteous, the poorer people became. Jesus does not mince words. He points out that this attitude meant that the institution was cheating widows out of their homes rather than caring for the vulnerable. Encouraging people to give beyond their means, whether Levites, or foreigners, or orphans, or widows, was not a celebration of faith but a robbery of the poor. Unfortunately, many people equate religious institutions and their leadership with "God" and God's own message. While the widow gave from her bleeding heart, the vampires in Pharisee clothing were all too eager to suck her in.

Jesus' sharp critique of the Temple system would come up again, as Jesus overthrows money changing tables in the Temple courtyard. But in a way, this passage today is even stronger, because it is all too easy for any of us at any time to cloak our own agendas as gestures of faith. This is the worse kind of sin, using faith itself as a motive for human goals and greed.

Part of what makes it so hard to understand sometimes what Jesus is saying and doing is because we have a desire to read what we want to hear. And it's easy to "misread" when we miss what's going on with our eyes and experience.

So I want to read with you this scripture again, and this time, I'm going to ask you to come and act out what's happening.

[Ask volunteers to come forward to play parts and hand out scripts to each.]

Let's look at what's happening here.

Jesus is sitting in the courtyard of the Temple and some of his disciples are with him. He's been teaching them and talking to them about a number of problematic issues....this all will culminate with his sentence regarding the final destruction of the Temple. They are watching some of the Pharisees and Scribes parade around looking important and haughty, expecting due respect from all. Jesus points them out. Here's what he says:

(Jesus leans in toward his disciples and says in a low voice): "Watch out for the 'legal experts.' They like to walk around in long robes. They want to be greeted with honor in the markets. They long for places of honor in the synagogues and at banquets. But THEY are the ones who cheat widows out of their homes, and then to show off they say long prayers. They will be judged most harshly!"

(Jesus then motions to his disciples to follow him, and he sits down across from the Temple money collection box for the Temple treasury, and he tells them to observe the people giving money). He wants his disciples to pay attention to what's going on.

Many rich people were throwing in money, which is fine if they have it. But then a poor widow comes forward, and she puts two small copper coins worthy a penny into the box.

(Jesus points to her and says): "I assure you that this poor widow has put in more than everyone who's been putting money in the treasury!"

(He points to the wealthy givers): "All of them are giving out of their spare change."

(Then motioning again to the poor widow woman): "But she from her hopeless poverty has given everything she had –the only money she had to live on."

Now do you hear what Jesus is doing here?

Is Jesus praising the woman? Goodness no. Jesus is appalled. He recognizes that she, in her feeling that she needed to give in order to be worthy, has been entirely taken advantage of by the Temple leadership.

This woman should not be giving the only money she had to live on. The Temple should have been instead taking care of her!

Jesus isn't saying that giving itself is wrong. But he is saying that those who can afford to give, should. Those who can't, should not have to, and definitely should not feel as if they must.

For the Temple, and unfortunately for many of our churches today, we have fallen into the trap of valuing people for their "weight in gold," rather than their intrinsic worth as fellow people of God.

To belong to the Temple meant to “pay” one’s dues. But Jesus doesn’t charge us for membership in God’s kingdom. Jesus knows that all are worthy of God’s grace no matter their means, their deeds, or their usefulness.

Just as Jesus redefines faith, love, and neighbor, Jesus also redefines worth.

Whether you are a woman, a child, a person who is ill, poor, rich, or of modest means, all are worthy to sit at the table of the Lord.

ChristianGlobe Network, Inc., by Lori Wagner

III Desiano

What are the risks we are willing to take? The news has reported strikes in various industries recently, a sign that workers have a little more umph. But to strike is to take a risk—that what strikers sacrifice will bring better benefits in the long run. Every day we hear more commercials for sports betting on our telephones. Every commercial carries the warning about gambling addiction, let alone the risk of losing. What is the risk of taking a vaccine against the risk of getting and spreading Covid?

Most people, like me, are risk averse. Why take a chance if you don't have to? I see all the people buying cards and then start scratching off to see if they won. Many of them look poor but obviously they are still willing to spend \$20, \$40 or even more on a regular basis, taking the risk that they might win. Not me. I'll buy a Lotto ticket for \$2 but I'm not going any deeper than that.

We have in our scriptures the image of the widow, first in reading about Elijah and then in the Gospel about the widow's two coins. What makes these images powerful is not merely that they are about widows, very vulnerable people in ancient time. More than that, these women are willing to risk everything they have.

One widow is keeping her son and herself alive in a drought. She doesn't have flour to make cakes for herself and her son. Should she take the risk of using up her last bit of flour for the local prophet who is passing through town? "The jar of flour will not go empty," the Prophet Elijah says to her. That's easy for him to say. But how will she know?

Right after Jesus excoriates religious leaders who manipulate old widows to acquire their wealth and savings, he points out to his disciples an old widow. She has only two coins to give to the Temple treasure, far less than all the others making donations. Yet Jesus points out the ultimate risk she is taking: she contributed from her poverty, everything she had to live on. Others can give out of discretion; when this woman gives, she's risking everything.

So it's not only that the two figures for reflection this week are widows; it's, even more, that the two women have learned to have total trust in God. They risk everything, but they would tell us that do not see it as risking because their generosity opens them up to deeper dimensions of God. They can give because they have learned to trust.

Oh, we say, I could never trust like that. Sure you can. Sure we do. Most of the time we do not show it, but if any one of us gets into a desperate situation, one in which we have literally nowhere to turn, we find ourselves crying out to God from the deepest parts of our inner being. We find ourselves throwing ourselves onto God. Because, ultimate, you and I have only God to trust in, only God to rely upon, only God as the foundation of our lives.

These widows see it. They are with us in today's Scriptures to help us see it in our own lives and begin to live it more fully, and to let our trust in God shape the way we look at and treat others. This is the trust that Jesus shows when he gives himself as an offering to the Father as we hear in the Letter to the Hebrews. He does this on behalf of us so that we can come to live in his trust, to live with his faith and openness. Jesus has taken on all the risk; as a result, he has removed the risk that makes us afraid.

Give it all, he says; give it all, he shows us. See, give it all, and you get everything in return

