

## **Mark 12:38-44**

As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

He sat down opposite the treasury and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.

Then he called his disciples and said 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."

Prayer: may the peace that surpasses all understanding,  
guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

## **Sermon**

Do not press me to leave you or  
to turn back from following you!  
Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people shall be my people, and your God my God.  
Where you die, I will die-- there will I be buried.  
May the LORD do thus and so to me,  
and more as well, if even death parts me from you!

We know these beautiful promises – you may have heard them at weddings... at times when we proclaim our undying love for another. It is easy to forget that the woman that made these vows was not speaking to her husband or her lover. She is making these vows to her mother-in-law in the aftermath of her own husband's death. Naomi is trying to make Ruth go back to her family of origin. As 2 widows, Naomi knows that they face hardship and poverty. And Ruth knows that Naomi needs loving care.

A widow in those days was in a very vulnerable financial condition. Most people lived under the authority of the ruling adult male in the family. Women lived under the authority and protection of men. Unmarried women

remained at home under the authority of their fathers. Married women lived under the authority and protection of their husbands. Widows were in a much more vulnerable place, with no legal standing and often no resources of their own. For this reason, the Jewish Law recognized widows as a special class of people who needed protection. But in reality, many were left to go forward alone.

Add into this that Naomi is living in a foreign country and wants to return home. It makes more sense for Ruth and her other daughter-in-law, Orpah, to go back to their own families, where they will be cared for and protected. And they are still young women, so in the care of their families there is a strong possibility that both will marry again.

But Ruth doesn't see it that way. She sees an older woman who is left completely alone in the world. Someone in need of care and love. Her husband is gone. Her sons are gone. There is no one who will protect her or care for her. She looks into this older woman's eyes and sees the woman who gave birth to and raised her own beloved husband. She sees the reflection of his face in her face. And she knows that Naomi has no one... no one but Ruth.

"I won't leave you," she says. And then she makes that eternal promise. She gives Naomi everything that she has... her own life. She is a true caretaker in every sense of the word.

Naomi not only accepts this gift, but ultimately is able to give back in abundance. Later we learn that Naomi is instrumental in helping Ruth and Boaz to find each other and to be married. Ruth and Boaz, who had a son... a son who was King David's grandfather. Ruth is Jesus' ancestor.

Hand in hand, these 2 widows – one old and one young – begin a journey that leads them to Bethlehem and a new chance.

I wonder if Jesus remembered this story as he watched another poor widow put her last 2 coins into the temple coffers. Perhaps he thought of his own mother or all the destitute widows he has encountered as he walked from village to village. What he sees is striking -- In the midst of so many wealthy citizens and powerful religious leaders, this one woman gives everything she has to God.

Jesus called his disciples over and said, "The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they'll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford—she gave her all." She gave everything she had to God

When I worked at the YMCA, I ran programs for children at Waverley Elementary School. Many of the families I worked with lived in or near poverty. One November, we were asked to have a food drive, with a prize given to the school program that gave the most donations. That seemed unfair to me, to ask these families to give food, when many did not have enough food to get through the month. All so their own kids could have a pizza party. So I privately resolved to give them a party anyway, and quietly put out the donation box. A few people brought in a can or two, but our collection was pretty small. On the last day, one of the mother's came in with a brown paper shopping bag filled with food. She was a widow, raising 2 children alone. They struggled day by day, and had recently moved to the area after months of living in homelessness. Her donation more than doubled our donation (although we were still nowhere near a pizza party). After she left, another mother pulled me aside and said "we cannot let her do this. I was just at the food bank getting food for my family. I saw her there – that's the food that they gave her." She literally had donated back what she had been given.

I did not return the food because she had given it with such pride and pleasure. I knew that on some fundamental level she needed to give back. I hoped and prayed that she had enough to get through the month. And yet, like the widows whose stories we heard today, I have faith that God saw that extravagant gift and responded in abundance.

These are not stories about how much we give. It is instead stories of how we choose to live with what we have. To dedicate our lives to one another and the One who loves us. To live so God can use us.

Jesus calls us to live our lives in a way that reflects of God's grace. Jesus tells us from the cross to love one another, unconditionally, to take care of one another in their times of need. He tells God to forgive those people who hurt him... he asks his friend to become a son to his own mother... and he invites the thief on the cross to join him at the banquet in heaven. Things that seem impossible suddenly become possible... and something that we

can all share in. Jesus is reuniting God's daughters and sons to each other, making our community into a family. He is putting the building blocks of family and faith back together, and he forces each of us to open our eyes wider and love our enemy not only on the inside, but even to embrace them as family. A family filled with unconditional love:

Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

Where you die, I will die-- there will I be buried.

May the LORD do thus and so to me,  
and more as well, if even death parts me from you!

Today is a day to remember that we should freely offer back to God all God's gifts. This is a day to remember, and to act in remembrance of God's grace to us, most especially in sending us Jesus. In the act of giving, those bent down by the world's troubles may be empowered to walk tall and to move forward to give as well. In the mission of God in the world, we come closest to seeing God's glory on earth... we see it in the joyful giving of ourselves to the one who loves us most. There is nothing more exciting and joyous than that. Hallelujah! And thanks be to God!