

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, November 12, 2006

Sermon Text: Mark 12:38-44

I’ve already had practice this morning at 8:28 shortening my 11:00 sermon down to ten minutes. Perhaps that’s what we’ll do again. Two or three weeks ago, we got out ten minutes early. Can I get those minutes back? No. I’m not sure how that works.

There was a boy named Ryan in one of my former churches, who had absolutely no filter on his mouth. He would say whatever came to mind, and once he noticed, we had a visiting preacher who came, and he noticed while we were eating lunch afterwards that the preacher had on a gold ring with rubies and diamonds in it. Ryan, just because he wanted to know, said, “Do you think Jesus would wear a ring like that?” Ryan, at an MYF meeting one time, when I mentioned in passing the widow’s mite, just expecting that he had heard of the widow’s mite story before, as we heard in the children’s sermon today, I said something about the widow’s mite, and he said, “The widows might what? The widows might what?”

Well, this widow might never be forgotten because she trusted God with all her might, with all her strength. Now, I do want to make clear that Jesus did not expressly condemn the giving of large sums. I want to make that perfectly clear. You may still give large sums. He did say that the widow with her two cents, I’ll call them, gave more because she had nothing left over, that huge givers gave less because they had so much left over. I read that Bill Gates, in the past few years, has given away billions, but he still has \$58 billion left over. It didn’t hurt him.

The widow’s ‘might’ was in her trusting God more than money. Whatever others gave, she gave more because she had nothing left over.

William Barclay wrote that real giving must be sacrificial. The amount of the gift never matters so much as its cost to the giver, not the size of the gift, but the sacrifice. Mother Teresa said if you give what you do not need, it isn’t giving. Giving should be on some level sacrificial. It should cost.

Have you ever wondered how it was that this widow caught Jesus’ attention? You’d wonder even more if you could picture, and I’ll try to paint a word picture of what it was like there at the temple in Jerusalem. We know from history that there were 13 collection boxes at the Jerusalem temple, and scholars believe that the mouths of them were shaped like trumpets, made of some sort of metal, funneling down into a box. 13 trumpets with the coins spiraling down into the box. There was no paper money so all the giving was accompanied by noise. Can you imagine all the noise of 13 brass trumpets constantly jingling and jangling coins of different sizes and amounts? Then imagine, what a puny sound the widow’s two tiny coins must have made in the midst of all that. Yet, in the middle of all the clang and clamor, Jesus noticed the widow’s dink, dink. She gave two lepta, the smallest coins in circulation. Now, we’re not talking about a lot of money here, but it was all she had. Even if she had hoarded it for herself, it wouldn’t have helped her very much. It might have paid for one small meal, but after that, she would be back to

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trusting God and the kindness of strangers. Those coins were not going to change her life. When you’ve got so little, a penny or two is not going to move you up and out of your situation. She chose the peace and the joy of doing what she could do. She chose where her two cents went. She gave to the temple treasury. She knew – with or without the coins – she was still a dependent person. All she could do was show upon whom she depended. We, I wonder where we are in this story. It is worth thinking about.

Jesus had just warned the disciples to watch out for the religious leaders who wear long robes and stand in the best seats in the sanctuary. I’m at the one with the spotlight on it. I suppose it’s a pretty good seat. He spoke against the religious leaders. He spoke against those who were actually running the temple. He still said it was a great faith and a great act and the widow gave all the more than anyone else because she trusted God even giving to this temple run by people that Jesus had just disparaged. She was poor. She was poor because she was a widow. Most women in that day were totally dependent upon their husbands and then upon their sons for economic survival. If they had neither then they were impoverished. In contrast to the scribe and to the rich people who were giving their offering, she has no social standing. She has no safety net. Except for Jesus’ notice, she was probably invisible to the crowd.

There was no reason to believe that the rich, who were giving very large sums, were hypocrites. There’s no reason to believe that from the text. They may have been just as faithful as the widow, but the difference was that the widow knows her need of God in the way that the rich could not fathom. Jesus said blessed are the poor because they know, really know, their utter dependence upon God. We, because we’re pretty well off, most of us, sometimes need a catastrophe, a crisis, to really get down on our knees praying. This widow had to get down on her knees and pray for her daily bread just to make it through each day.

Now, I do know that there is pain on every pew, and there are times, there have been difficult situations for you, and perhaps some of you are going through those right now, but it is those difficult times when we are closest to God. When relationships falter, when health deserts us, when loved ones suffer or die, when we can’t pay our bills, and we can’t see a way out, those are the times when we pray without ceasing, when we understand how dependent upon God we are always. Outside of those times, many of us live under the illusion that we control our destiny. We don’t! We rely upon our education, our competency, our connections, and our prestige in the community, extended family. All of those things may be very good, but remember Jesus doesn’t praise the folks in charge or the folks who are not in crisis, the ones who seem to be the movers and the shakers. He commends only the widow, the one who knows and acknowledges her complete dependence and trust in God.

I knew a man in my first church named Bill Meadors. He’s passed on now. He worked hard, and he made good money as a contractor. He raised a large family, and he briefly lived in Georgia where he joined a little Methodist church there. He told me what happened there. Turns out that he was the chief giver. He found this out because they

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started treating him differently. He gave only a tithe, which he considered his bounden duty, but apparently they considered him something rare and prominent. They started to ask him about every major decision in the life of that church. They’d say, “Bill, what do you think? What do you think, Bill?” They started to defer to him and asked him to be on every committee. Finally, he put two and two together, and he said, “Look, I’m nothing special! I am not giving to gain anything. I’m giving because I’ve already gained everything from God. I’m sorry, but we have different ideas about how a church should run. I’m going to have to find another church where giving is something that everybody does.” So he left because they tried to make him prominent and powerful, and all he wanted to do was be faithful.

Reverend Gordon Cosby tells this story. A deacon sent for me one day, and told me that he wanted my help. He said that we have in our congregation a widow with six children, and I looked at the records and discovered that she is putting \$4.00 a week, a tithe of her true income, into the collection plate. Now, she’s not able to do that, and preacher, we want you to talk to her and tell her that she shouldn’t feel any obligation or responsibility about that. Gordon said I am not wise now and I was even less wise then. I went and told her the concern of the deacons, and I told her as graciously and as supportively as I could that she was relieved of the responsibility of giving. Then Gordon writes, “As I was speaking with her, tears began to stream down her face. She said, “I want to tell you that you are taking away the last thing that gives my life dignity and meaning.” This widow, just like the one Jesus noticed, lived with one foot in the world, where money mattered most, and the other foot in God’s kingdom, where trust in God matters most. She knew that she was wholly dependent upon the riches of God’s grace. She participated in God’s work and acknowledged God’s sustenance and even leaned into that sustenance by giving back from her meager resources.

I wonder if it is possible to be relatively healthy and financially secure, with all our loved ones safe and sound, and still be deeply in touch with our dependence upon God. Human nature being what it is, when things are going well, we tend to forget God. I think that for many of us our default in easy times is self-reliance, trusting in our own might, but maybe can learn from the widow’s example, and remember the times when we knew that only God sustained us moment by moment. Each of these widows, the Biblical one and the one of which I just spoke, found a way to act out their faith with a simple ritual of putting a little bit of money into an offering plate. Sacrificial giving, showing how deeply she trusted God.

Now, there are other things that we can do to show that we trust God. One is to come here each week hoping that the worship service will be worshipful. Hoping that the preacher will have something to say, hoping that in the prayer and in the music and in the fellowship we will be touched. We will be uplifted in our faith or perhaps find direction. It doesn’t happen every week, but we come with hope and we come to worship God. Daily prayer, daily Scripture reading, singing to God praises in the shower, which is the only place I’m allowed to sing, y’all won’t let me sing in the mike here. There are many things we can do to show that we trust and worship God, and if we’ve become stale in

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our faith, we can reach out with hands-on service to others to reconnect in our service to others in the name of Christ, who has served us.

Once, Caroline and I took a Thanksgiving meal, all the fixings to a Thanksgiving meal, to a couple we knew who were having financial difficulties. We didn’t know how bad the difficulties were. They had no power at all. They could not cook it, and we had this raw turkey to hand them. We had to take it back home. They were embarrassed. We were embarrassed. We couldn’t afford to pay their power bill so we cooked their whole meal, and took it back to them a second time. Giving money is good, but giving of yourself is better.

Our Men’s Club builds ramps, and that mite, that small act has might, has power in it, by showing God’s love and touching the life and the heart and the needs of another. Our UMW has a prison ministry, and that small giving of time has might in it because it shows love with skin on to women who might otherwise feel they were forgotten by God. Our Backyard Bible Club has small mite of time each month, which may well make the difference in the course of a life for God. The small mite of time teaching a Sunday School class, who knows what power will come from the foundation that God helps build through your prayers and your presence in classes and in worship and in studies, through your attendance and your invitation of others. That small mite, that small gift of service has real power and might in showing on whose side you are. Sure, you can and should give money, too, but not to pay the bills. You give money because God gave first.

A young Kenyan woman and her two small children were frequent worshipers in their village church. Every day was a struggle for her and her poor family. At a worship service, as the offering plate was being passed, this poor African mother removed her ragged sandals, and when the offering plate was passed to her, she took the basket, and she placed it on the ground beside her, and reverently and humbly and gently, she stepped into it, her whole body in the middle of the basket, just similar to Mary Alexander’s story. As she prayed quietly, a hush fell over the small congregation. After a few moments, she stepped out of the basket, picked it up, and passed it on. May we know in our hearts and souls that God is our rock and our redeemer, the source of strength and hope and courage and life and life eternal. May we continue to offer up all that we have and all that we are, our very selves, in response to the one who gave Himself for us. Amen.