

"Two Cents Worth"

Mark 12:38-44

November 9, 2003

© Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

The last 15 years I've used the Revised Common Lectionary as a source for my Sunday sermons. For those not familiar with the Lectionary, it is a three year cycle of Scripture organized around the Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke — with large hunks of John's Gospel thrown in. This year we've heard nearly all of Mark's Gospel. The first Sunday of Advent we will begin reading the Gospel of Luke. Each gospel reading is accompanied by an Old Testament Lesson, an Epistle Lesson and one of the Psalms. Attention to the Lectionary offers us a broad exposure to Scripture that is, I believe, healthy for the church and the preacher.

This is our third trip through the Gospel of Mark since I've been here. You might not remember the other journeys but, as an ancient wise man said, repetition is the mother of learning. Constant exposure to the good news about Jesus and his teaching will, over time, form our souls in appropriate ways. After all, we believe that Word and Sacrament are the primary means of our spiritual formation.

The Lectionary is also a healthy discipline for preachers. It forces us to deal with biblical texts we'd rather avoid. There are quite a few passages of the Bible that are difficult or uncomfortable. Most of us need to be forced to live in them and preach from them.

Today's Gospel Lesson is one of those uncomfortable texts. The first part is a prophetic word to the clergy. It's not easy to preach a sermon to myself with you looking on. I mean, what's the point? The second part of the Lesson is a story about a widow and her money. It, too, is a prophetic word pointed at you and me. It's about our money.

You might have noticed this is the first Sunday of our annual stewardship drive. You likely have your resistance up already! And I know from long experience that stewardship sermons make very little difference.

Now, honestly, this text about money was assigned to me by the Lectionary, I didn't choose it! Nevertheless, here it is. So, how do we hear a word from the Lord in this difficult, uncomfortable text? I suspect very few, if any, of you came here today to hear a sermon about pastors or about your money. So, you see my point about difficult texts.

Take, for example Jesus' prophetic word to the clergy. By the way, prophecy is ordinarily God's truth spoken to power. Jesus directs some hard words to religious leaders.

Did you notice Jesus' description of those religious leaders he warns us to avoid? They enjoy wearing long robes, he said. So here I stand before you in a long robe! And I rather enjoy wearing it. This robe is a sign of my ordination to ministry. I am an official Teacher of the Church. When I come to this pulpit I like wearing that sign of my office. Besides my robe has other symbols on it that tell about my education. I worked hard to earn those stripes and don't mind you knowing it.

Next, Jesus warns you to watch out for religious leaders who enjoy respectful greetings in the marketplace. Why just this week, twice in fact, I was in a public place and someone called out, Dr. Fisher. I responded and I don't mind telling you that respectful title sounded good to me. I don't ask anyone to call me Dr. It's not necessary. But I worked five long years to earn that degree. I don't mind getting credit for that work.

Then Jesus warns you to watch for clergy who sit in the best seats at church or at banquets. Thursday night Jeff and I were honored guests at a banquet. We both spoke at the affair and we had a table right up front with the dignitaries for the evening. Both of us were introduced with very nice and respectful words. I didn't object to the great table or the introduction.

As if that's not enough, Jesus warns against people who pray long prayers. My prayer today won't be very long, but Thanksgiving Day is coming and in our Pilgrim Thanksgiving Service I am assigned a part of the service called The Long Prayer.

My only comfort in this text is that I have never ever stolen from a widow's house.

Seriously, I don't think Jesus' point is the robe itself. Nor is Jesus suggesting we not use respectful titles and never pray lengthy prayers. Rather, Jesus is warning against the very human tendency in all ministers to reduce God and God's work to mere things that serve us. When I need the robe or the title for my ego needs or use God's work or God's people to meet my personal desires, I'm in trouble.

This work we do is God's work, not ours. The people are God's people, not ours. When the servants of God use God's work or God's people to serve themselves, when we exploit the work of God for our own ends; when we abuse God's people, it is a corruption that is heinous.

Jesus is talking here about the lethal combination of pride and power. Both pride and power have an infinite power to corrupt. We all know that. Jesus is telling us to watch out for it.

Take money, for instance. Money is power and the next story in Mark is about the power of money. This little story is more than a quaint story to trot out on Stewardship Sunday to convince people to give more. That trivializes a word from Jesus that is prophetic: truth spoken to power.

Jesus was sitting in the Temple by one of the gates. By the gate was a large box that served as the offering plate for the Temple. People were streaming into the Temple for worship. Most of them put an offering in the box.

That's the way it was in Jesus' world. Then and now, the Jewish people are committed to philanthropy. An ancient rabbi said compassionate generosity is part of the character of the descendants of Abraham and Sarah.

Most people took the law seriously and donated one tenth of everything they earned to the work of God. Beyond the tithe, God's people were required to give an offering - we'd call it alms or

charity - to support the poor. Some people were so benevolent, the rabbis had to pass a law that capped alms giving at twenty percent of a person's income.

That's the social setting of our story. People were dropping large gifts into the box. Jesus was watching them. Along came a poor widow who dropped two cents into the box — her last two cents.

Jesus called his disciples, Hey, did you see that? This poor widow gave more than all the rich people gave.

We've heard the story and likely don't feel its dramatic power. Jesus reverses our ordinary way of thinking. He commends the smallest gift given. That's odd.

Most of us belong to alumni organizations and many give to their alma mater. Imagine the alumni magazine featuring a \$10 annual gift with a long article complete with a picture and the suggestion a building be named after the small giver. That's not the way we think. Church stewardship tends to operate the ordinary way. We pay attention to the big gifts and seldom commend gifts of great sacrifice.

Jesus reverses logic, too. He suggests that the significance of a gift is not the amount given but the amount left after the gift. This poor woman didn't give much but after she gave she had nothing. Now that's significant.

The story ends abruptly. As usual Jesus stops short and teases our minds into further thought. What do you suppose that means for us? That's the question.

Jesus' point isn't the widow's money by itself any more than his previous point was about robes themselves. Jesus never condemns money or affluence. He does, however, sternly warn about what money can do. Money has power. Money is power. Money corrupts.

Nor does Jesus commend poverty itself. He has no romanticized view of poor people. With the entire Bible Jesus urges God's people to do what we can to end poverty. Jesus does, however, suggest that poverty mixed with faith does good things for the soul.

That's Jesus' point. The issue here is our soul, our relationship with God. Money or lack of it affects faith.

The widow is not commended for the two cents itself. Rather, her sacrificial gift powerfully demonstrates her utter dependence on God. After all, those two pennies wouldn't make or break her finances. It wouldn't buy a loaf of bread. She could freely throw her last two cents in the box because she'd been forced to depend on God for her life.

My affluence makes me independent. Our culture tells us financial independence is very good. I suppose so. I've been working at saving for a rainy day all my life. When I can't work any more

I don't want to depend on others to care for me. I've heard my parents say it over and over. They don't want to be a burden on me and my brother. I guess I appreciate that.

But the more I have the less I need God, or anyone else, except for some of the messy details of life. You know: sickness, family squabbles, job issues. But I seldom, if ever, depend on God for the basics of life. I'm independent! I suppose that's why Jesus told some people to give everything away. He knew their stuff kept them from depending on God.

Listen to the way we pray. Seldom, if ever, do we ask God to make us more dependent on him or other people.

Jesus called men and women then and now to life in the Kingdom of God. That call is a summons to radical dependence on God for everything.

I don't think Jesus' call to radical trust in God means we should quit our jobs, divest ourselves of our possessions and live in poverty. The real question is how folks like us — who are pretty independent — increase our dependence on God?

Or, how can affluent people have a relationship with God in which our stuff doesn't get in the way of trust in God?

The English priest-poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, had an agnostic friend who asked Hopkins how he might come to believe in God. Hopkins answered in two words, Give alms. Flannery O'Connor took up that idea and suggested to an unbelieving friend, God can be known through charity.

Again, the point is not the giving itself but its result: increasing dependence on God. Will we give until we have to trust God?

Stewardship is not about money or church budgets — not really. Giving is about the shape of our souls. Following Jesus means generosity because giving creates dependence. Giving makes this community of faith a genuine community of people mutually dependent on each other and God. Generosity grows faith and faith will certainly love and serve the world. Amen.