

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
November 18, 2012
Mark 12: 38-44
Thanksgiving Sunday

“Counting Your Blessings: God’s Generosity”

The story of the scribes and the widow reminds me of a case I heard not long ago about a congregation faced with the decision as to whether to accept a large donation from a man suffering from some neurological diminishment. Like the widow, the man was giving everything he had to the church-literally everything he had. But in the process of giving everything to the church, he was depriving his wife, whom he was divorcing, and his children-all of whom had been his primary caretakers during his time of decline, of a means to sustain their home and farm. The donation was being made in reaction to a sense of loss of control on the part of the man, and motivation to appreciate the care offered by his new congregation over that of the family he was estranging.

The case went to court when the wife felt she no other remedy, with the congregation weighing in on the side of the man, and eventually winning the donation. The court, as is common in such dealings, had only legal guidelines, not moral guidelines. The dilemma facing the congregation, and the donor, was whether this was good stewardship. Was it good stewardship to accept the gift, a gift which the donor wanted to give? Or should they have declined the gift, citing the need for the man to support his estranged wife and children? What is the ethical thing to do?

Did the church, in its desire to support its budget, a desire that I assume was well intentioned and, I would hope, its desire to support a budget that does good things, did the church get caught in a system that “devours widows houses”? That’s the question for today.

And it’s a question that goes broader and deeper than churches. It’s a question for all of us. How much do we get caught in an economic system that devours widow’s houses?

Before we answer that, let’s put the question into context. I want you to imagine Jesus, sitting in the temple courtyard. It’s crowded and noisy and bustling with activity. People are coming and going, selling their wares, buying other goods, and making their offering to the temple. In the midst of the hustle and bustle, Jesus is trying to teach the disciples and other passers-by. He’s warning them about the pious religious leaders, the scribes, who like to sit in the best seats of the house and want to be paid respect, even though they act like scoundrels to the people who show them such respect. They “devour widows’ houses”, Jesus says. How exactly the scribes did this is unclear, but they may have been exploiting widows through transactions involving their houses and personal property. Perhaps there was a little subprime mortgage action going on.

After Jesus warns the people about the scribes, he sits down to watch the crowd. As if on cue, in walks a poor widow who deposits two small coins into the temple offering plate. She leaves the scene as quickly as she entered but not before Jesus can point her out to the disciples. It's at this time that he makes his comment about the widow's offering.

Now, any of you who have heard this story before, especially when given in the context of a stewardship sermon, have probably been taught that Jesus praises the woman for giving everything she had to the temple.

“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.”

Traditional interpretations praise the widow and contrast her to those dirty, rotten, cheap scribes.

But the fact is, we have no idea what tone of voice Jesus took on that day. Maybe he did praise her. But maybe, just maybe, he took on a tone of lament. For all we know, Jesus may have looked at her and just shook his head in disgrace:

“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.”

Maybe underneath his words there was a tinge of disgrace at the fact that this poor widow was giving everything she had to the scribes and institution that devours her house, that takes advantage of the fact that she's a poor widow.

Personally, I think that when these two stories are read together, it's hard not to look at Jesus' words as words of lament. But even more, it's hard not to hear his words as an indictment upon any system, be it religious or not, that results in a poor widow giving all she has so that the system's leaders may continue to live lives of wealth.

I know a lot of traditional interpretations of this story like to praise the widow and make the rest of us feel guilty for not giving everything we have, but I'm here to tell you that this story should make us angry, really angry, that religious, political, and economic systems prey on widows and other poor people. We should be outraged.

But before we raise our righteous fists in anger, we also need to be honest and admit that we, too, contribute to those systems and benefit from them. We, too, take part in the devouring of widows' houses. Granted, we may not take part in subprime mortgages, but we do our share. We buy goods made by cheap labor so we can afford the good on the cheap and in so doing, we help devour widows' houses-metaphorically speaking.

Last year on Black Friday weekend, spending reached a record 52.4 billion dollars. The two biggest retailers were Wal-Mart and Best Buy. Now I know there are people who don't shop at Wal-Mart because of their anti-union stance, and that's fine. Everyone takes a stand for something and by doing that, those people are trying their best not to devour widows' houses, so to speak. But I also know some of those well intentioned people own iPhones, and we all know that iPhones are made with cheap Chinese labor. Here's the thing. We say we want affordable wages for everyone, but we don't want to pay for those higher cost manufacturing jobs. It may cost us our iPhone. When I was home last week visiting my parents, my Dad and I drove up to Cleveland, which is only about 30 minutes north of Akron. The closer one gets to Cleveland, the more empty warehouses there are. Block after block after block of old manufacturing plants that are closed. Those jobs are gone. Did we directly close those plants? No. But did we indirectly contribute to their demise? Probably. As consumers, we make choices what we're going to buy and how we're going to spend, and the lower the cost the better. We all do it.

But that doesn't excuse it. No where in this story does Jesus give a pass to people who unknowingly support systems that devour widows houses or only contribute to them because that's the only way to get by. Jesus condemns everyone, all of the scribes.

This story demands that we get honest about our part in the system. It demands that we acknowledge that we too are scribes, whether that's knowingly or unknowingly or in large part or in small part. It demands that we reflect on our own complicity.

But reflection isn't enough. Reflection must lead to action. And not just the action of taking an ornament off a tree and buying a present for a child at Christmas, even though that's certainly a good thing to do and I'm glad we do that. I mean the sort of action that gets to the very root cause of the system; the sort of action that would put an end to the need to buy Christmas presents for poor children because there would be any poor children to buy Christmas presents for.

This story demands that we get serious about living as Christ's disciples and following Christ's way, and that way is hard; it's tough; and more often than not the things Jesus said and did should make us squirm, and not make us feel guilty that we're not enough like the poor old widow, but make us squirm so that we do something about the fact that there are systems demanding that poor widows give everything they have to them.

In 5 short days, we'll celebrate Thanksgiving which means that all of us here will sit down to a table overflowing with food. When we do that, it should behoove all of us to remember the first Thanksgiving which, as I've said before, was not the bountiful spread most of us have come to expect. Throughout that first brutal winter, most of the colonists remained on board the Mayflower, where they suffered from exposure, scurvy and outbreaks of contagious disease. Only half of the Mayflower's original passengers and crew lived to see their first New England spring. In March, the remaining settlers moved ashore, where they received an astonishing visit from an Abenaki Indian who greeted them in English. Several days later, he returned with another Native American, Squanto,

who had been kidnapped by an English sea captain and sold into slavery before escaping to London and returning to his homeland on an exploratory expedition.

It would have been easy for Squanto to say to those pilgrims, whose ancestors sold him into slavery and basically devoured his house, “go fend for yourselves.” But he didn’t.

Squanto taught the Pilgrims, weakened by malnutrition and illness, how to cultivate corn, extract sap from maple trees, catch fish in the rivers and avoid poisonous plants. He also helped the settlers forge an alliance with the Wampanoag, a local tribe, which would endure for more than 50 years. Tragically, that alliance remains one of the sole examples of harmony between European colonists and Native Americans.

On Thanksgiving, it would behoove all of us to remember that story, because so many Americans these days are tempted to circle the wagons and only care for their own kind, whether in terms of school, property or civic responsibility. But Thanksgiving is a reminder that we’re all in this together and that our personal well-being is connected with the well-being of others. And this story is a reminder that if someone is not well, we need to do something about that, because that’s what Christ demands.

Imagine, if you can, those two coins the woman dropped in the temple offering. Now, imagine, if you can, that you are those coins. Your life is an offering to God. What are you going to do with it? What are you going to do right now, today, with who you are and what you have? What do you have to offer? How can you stop a system from devouring widows’ houses? What can you do this week, or this month, to make a difference?

As you celebrate Thanksgiving this week, remember that it is not just a day, it’s a way of life—it’s what we do when we follow Jesus. John F. Kennedy said, “As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.” Someone else once said, “Thanksgiving, after all, is a word of action.”

John Wesley was once asked what one person could do on behalf of the kingdom of God. He answered:

Do all the good you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.

May it always be so. Christ demands nothing less.

Amen.

Sources: www.workingpreacher.org

Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4, Commentary for Proper 27