

Mark 12:38-44 25th Sunday after Pentecost November 10, 1991

38As 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, 39and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! 40They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

41He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 43Then 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. 44For 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."

Nearly twenty years ago I was sitting in the living room of a house in the Capitol Hill area of Denver, Colorado. With me were people I knew well, my internship supervisor, classmates from seminary, a professor. That house was the Denver house of studies of Wartburg Seminary, a place where farm girls and farm boys from the prairies of Iowa could learn about God and about the city.

As we sat and talked we were munching on cheese, sipping on wine. I'm sure many humorous things were said that evening, many deep theological thoughts. But of all that was said I remember but one comment. Half serious, half joking, the professor, Peter Kjeseth, asked, "I wonder what the widow in Kansas would think if she knew that her benevolence offering were buying wine and cheese for us?" From that moment on the wine was not as sweet, the cheese not as tasty. After that we chipped in for our parties.

If it were only, always, so simple.

Last week we held two cottage meetings. I was delighted with how they went. I talked with people about giving first fruits; we looked at a video showing the work of the ELCA, next year's budget was presented, discussed. Talking with a few people afterward, I was told it was a good experience, not a pressuring, but an opportunity for learning and growth.

But then something awful happened. Someone responded. Not a person with an abundance, rather one with but a little - one who has far less than I have. I felt ashamed. The response was a very costly gift for the one who gave it, yet a gift that I could give without a second's thought and never miss it. Who am I to beg from those who have little or nothing to pay for my living? Does my wine and cheese rob another of bread?

Which brings me to our gospel for today: I read the text the way it was assigned or appointed to be read, Mark 12:41-44. Usually I have preached this text using only those verses. The sermon is about sacrificial giving. Three years ago I told you about the widow who gave all that she could give, how her gift was greater than all the others. And how God wants us to give like that.

Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and he 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 Jesus 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."

How to pressure widows, so clergy can have wine and cheese - that should be the title of this text. How to pressure the folks to give, so they feel guilty and give enough to buy some peace of mind next week.

But Friday morning when I sat down to write this sermon, I made a mistake. I looked at the context of this story. I found out that the story of the widow may have a different meaning altogether so that it will not be you who will leave guilty, but I.

Listen to this whole passage, beginning with verse 38: As Jesus 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 places in the synagogues, and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearances say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

Who is Jesus talking about? People like me – people who wear long robes - who are greeted with the title, the reverend, in market places and shopping malls - who get to go first in line and to sit at head tables. What do such people do? - we devour widow's houses and say long prayers for the sake of appearances. And how do we devour widow's houses? By saying, "Give everything to God. Remember the widow who did."

What began as a sermon on you needing to sacrifice by giving to God, is turning into a condemnation of people who live off of others, especially the poor.

There is one more piece of the context of this passage that I must share with you. For after Jesus had spoken of the condemnation of those who devour widow's houses, and had

pointed to the widow who offered everything she had to the temple treasury, We read these words, "As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

Those who feed off the poor are heading for destruction. Even the temple of God, built and maintained with the sacrifices of widows will be destroyed.

I don't feel very secure this morning, in my long robe, soon to say my long prayer, then to pass the plates to be filled by many who have less of this world's goods than I so that I and people like me might have more than enough, and so buildings of stone might be maintained. Yet I will continue to wear the robe and say the prayer and pass the plates.

Many of you will not feel very secure this morning either, for you know that if you and I who have much would give greatly from our abundance then we could be giving to widows, to the poor, for the homeless. We could do more, but we won't do all we could. I won't, you won't. God will be disappointed.

My temptation is to say to you, "Don't feel guilty. You are doing well enough."

And your hearts want to say to me, "Don't feel guilty, you are doing good enough."
That would be a lie.

I devour widow's houses, you withhold from the poor - that is the truth, an awful truth. And we will all one day come tumbling down - our buildings, our wealth, our long robes torn to tatters.

Then we will have only one hope, our Lord Jesus Christ. Tell me that I am good enough, innocent, and you will lead me away from him. But let me be the guilty one, and I will know Jesus is the only one in whom I can trust in life and in death. And I will be free.

"All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Thanks be to God.

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