

Sermon: Worth a Penny

New North Church, Hingham

Steven Aucella

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Based on **1 Kings 17:8-16; Psalm 146; Mark 12:38-44**

Who has heard this story from Mark before? It most often pops up during stewardship drives where pledges are pledged, and we talk about money in Scripture, usually for the first time all year. We examine greed as an un-Christian thing, and we recall that it is the *love* of money that is the root of all evil. We frown upon the pursuit of wealth for ourselves, yet we are told to be generous in our giving to the church.

All that is true but we miss something when we read this passage in this way. In the ancient Near East, it was the widows and orphans whom Jesus called ‘the least of these’ and therefore, their well-being ought to inform our sense of justice. Then as now, money and *in*justice seem to go together, and that’s bad for the widow in Mark’s story.

Modern economies are nothing like those in the first century. Two years ago, California had the sixth-largest economy in the world, ahead of entire countries like France and Brazil. One year ago, California was number five. Some call it Paradise – when it’s not on fire.

Modern economies differ from those in the first century not only in size but also in the sheer variety of industry. Few economies these days rely on only agriculture to get by, and certainly not on just one crop, not since the Irish potato famine. First-century Judah produced wine, olives, and grain, plus sheep, lots of sheep.

We would not today rely on something like the Temple to act as our national bank. We think of money differently now. Most of us carry it around in the form of a plastic debit card or a checkbook, not in a satchel filled with coins. Cash and checks make no noise when they hit the offering plate, unlike in the Temple where everyone could hear exactly how many coins you dropped into a metal box.

One thing that hasn’t changed in two thousand years is, we hate to *lose* money. Leave your debit card in an ATM and your anxiety level jumps to ten immediately. Miss a paycheck, and things might get tense real fast.

In the ancient Near East, temples often *did* function as national banks or treasuries and that means they sometimes got robbed. The Temple in Jerusalem was a literal gold mine, and it was often the Roman governor who tried to rob it. In fact, the great revolt in Mark's time started when the governor, Gessius Florus, tried to embezzle some tax funds in the year 66.

For the people, though, the Temple treasury was an economic problem. They paid tithes and offerings to the priests and the Temple itself, taxes to Herod, and tribute to the emperor. Temple taxes did sometimes fund community projects such as city maintenance, but we would consider most of the wealth in the treasury, which included private funds, 'dead capital' because it just sat there, locked away, not helping anybody.

That was the situation when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, and the first thing he did was drive out the money changers from the outer Temple precinct.

The widow in today's passage from Mark is often raised up as the model example of sacrificial giving. I have heard sermons that have basically asked, "Why can't we all be more like her? The widow, after all, gave *everything* she had so why can't we?"

Jesus sees something else entirely.

Beware of the scribes, he said. This follows from last week's reading where Jesus and a scribe actually had a friendly conversation about the greatest commandment. In Scriptural time, that was just minutes ago. So, Jesus is not denouncing all scribes, just the ones who like to flaunt their office and take advantage of their social position. Beware of the scribes, Jesus said, who **devour widows' houses**.

If Jesus is opposed to the devouring of widows' houses, how could he possibly be pleased with what he sees here? He doesn't praise the widow's giving; he laments it.

The letter of James, the brother of Jesus, defines pure religion as caring for widows and orphans in their distress (James 1:27). In Exodus, God warned the Israelites point-blank not to abuse any widow or orphan (Exodus 22:22); Psalm 146 says that the Lord upholds the orphan and the widow but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. The passage from First Kings reminds us that God is aware of the widow's situation and that God cares for her and will provide for her: the jar of meal will not be emptied, and the jar of oil will not fail, for the widow and her household.

The implication in both readings is that God sees what's going even if we don't.

Elizabeth Malbon, a professor at Virginia Poly Tech, wrote that the Jesus who calls his disciples over and says “Truly, I tell you” is Jesus the teacher, and in the moment makes ‘a solemn proclamation about the kingdom now and in the future, its Messiah, and the demands and rewards that fall to the followers of such a Messiah of such a kingdom.’ The Messiah must give his ‘whole life,’ she writes, and it may also be required of us to do the same.

In the Gospel according to John, Jesus says, ‘I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord’ (John 10:17-18). The widow does this too, in effect: by putting in her last two coins, knowing it was everything she had, she is giving her whole life by making a total commitment to God.

One scholar wrote that the true measure of a gift is not how much is given but how much remains behind. Unlike the scribes in today’s reading, our giving ought to sustain those who can ill afford to give all they have. We would preach against poverty, not encourage it. The good news is that God sees what is really going on even when no one else does. God is present for the widow and God will be present for us as we work to fulfill our responsibilities to the least among us, to be better stewards of our faith community as well as of our financial resources.

Today’s passage represents the last scene in Jesus’ public ministry. All that is left is an extended discourse about the Temple’s impending destruction followed by the passion narrative.

Jesus is on his way to giving the whole of his life. Let us be worthy of the gift.
Amen.