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First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
November 11, 2018

Everything You Think You Know...
Mark 12:38-44

A couple of weeks ago, I found myself in a time warp.

I wasn't watching Rocky Horror at the Alabama Theatre, though that would've been fun.

I was part of a retreat for young adults who spent the last year as volunteers serving the church in communities in the US and around the world through the PCUSA Young Adult Volunteer or YAV Program. We gathered at Highlands Presbyterian Camp and Conference Center north of Denver – beautiful and remote, at the doorstep of Rocky Mountain National Park. We were there to process their transitions from life in intentional Christian community back to reality. And let me tell you –after being with those young people, I have such hope for our church, and for our country. Hearing their struggles to adjust, their culture shock, and their desire to continue to have a positive impact on the world, I was thrown back to my own experience of moving from Guatemala to Boston to start seminary almost fifteen years ago. Though YAVs serve in many different contexts here and abroad, with churches and nonprofits, with people of all ages, there's a common experience that most volunteers share. YAV's arrive on site with a strong desire to *do something*: to help people, to eradicate poverty, to fight injustice. But they inevitably end up spending a lot of time *not doing much of anything*. And it can be frustrating, even disappointing, to feel like you don't have much to offer. YAVs are often there for accompaniment, to walk alongside the communities they serve, learning how to offer the ministry of presence. Like most YAV's, I eventually learned the value of just being with people, and listening, and from that intentional accompaniment learning far more than I ever expected.

There was a young man in my small group who served at Mercy Community Church in Atlanta, which serves mostly people experiencing homelessness in midtown, so it functions as a day shelter with activities and free lunch most weekdays. There was not much he was asked to do at first beyond just spending time talking with people, and it was really difficult for him to feel like he wasn't contributing anything. Then he realized he had something to offer – he was a comedian, who had studied comedic performance, and could make people laugh. So he did. Laughter became his offering at Mercy.

In the scripture we heard this morning, Jesus focuses his attention on someone who didn't have much to offer. After condemning hypocritical scribes, he lifts up a poor widow who gives her last two cents to the temple. It's probably a story you've heard before – the widow's mite. At first glance, on the surface, the message of this passage is pretty straightforward: don't be a hypocrite, don't take advantage of vulnerable people. We should all give as generously as the widow.

But. The truth is that the story is a bit more complicated than that.

First, with anti-Semitism rearing its ugly head lately, please know that the first part of our passage is levied not at all scribes or all of Judaism, but only those scribes who seek to exploit their position for personal gain. Jesus condemns scribes who act piously in public but secretly take advantage of the very ones God commands them to protect: the poor, foreigners, orphans, and widows. We live in a state that just voted overwhelmingly to enshrine the Ten Commandments in public places. One might expect, then, that this public testimony to Christian values would be evident in some other ways. Alabama: the state with the fewest homeless children! The lowest infant mortality rate because we make sure everyone who needs quality healthcare can get it! The smallest prison system with no cash bail! The least regressive taxes! The lowest interest payday loans! But wait. Beware the scribes who devour widows' houses and say long prayers for the sake of appearances. We might say, beware the scribes who want to display Mosaic law in public places but don't want to live by it.

Jesus is teaching in the temple, watching people make their offering at the treasury. He notices and calls attention to a poor widow who gives her last two cents. Research has shown that poor people are far more generous than most wealthy people – they give away far more as a proportion of their income. Time and again, Jesus asks his disciples to leave their lives behind and follow him, to sell what they have and give the money away. Living with nothing but radical faith and reliance on God is a way to enter the kingdom. Here is but one more example of a call to generosity.

But. Some scholars believe Jesus isn't holding the woman up as an example to be emulated.¹ Instead, they hear Jesus offering a lament. By drawing attention to her gift, he is lamenting the fact that she gives all that she owns to the temple, and condemning the temple hierarchy that benefits from her sacrifice, those who would devour even her last two cents.

What do we make of this? What do I make of this, with my long robe, who have been encouraging our congregation to give as a larger percentage of your income this year?

A couple of things. First, we aren't the temple. We aim to be transparent about our finances, and give at least twelve percent directly to mission partners, and far more than that to support the mission and ministry that happens in and through this building. But we still need to hear Jesus' critique and continue to strive for authenticity, and to fulfill the Biblical mandate to love God and love our neighbors.

Lutheran preaching professor David Lose points out that Jesus notices what most everyone else did not: amidst many extravagant gifts to the temple, Jesus sees a poor

¹ Wright, Ched Meyers (*Binding the Strong Man*) and others with a socio-economic justice centered read of Mark's gospel read this passage as a convicting the temple hierarchy's exploitation of the poor.

woman making a small but profound offering.² He sees her and understands the power of what she gives. Small though it is, her gift is worthy of his attention. Christ sees her struggle to give a sacrificial gift, and cares about her plight. So we can be assured that there is no struggle, no suffering or sacrifice that escapes God's notice. Our gifts, and our giving matter to God – even when we feel like the gift is too small, or never going to make a difference. We give glory to the one whose power is able to do far more than we are able to dream or even imagine, right?

Dean of Vanderbilt Divinity School Emilie Townes suggests it's not the woman's sacrifice that interests her, it's the offering – the two coins that signify her whole life – that is compelling.³ “Those coins represent more than money,” she says. “They represent faith and belief and how these must be lived out in our lives in concrete acts and not solely by rituals that no longer hold religious power.”⁴ Which makes me wonder – What do we offer? What concrete acts help us live out our faith through service and love for our friends and families, our church, our colleagues, our city, or our world? Have you ever offered something that represented your whole life? Your passion, your wisdom, your expertise, your very heart?

The first member of this congregation I visited after moving here was Jerry Abbott, who had congestive heart failure I think and had been hospitalized. I remember feeling the same feeling as when I was a YAV – I didn't have much to offer Jerry. I couldn't heal him, and I didn't even have much information about the church I might share, I didn't know you all yet. But he was sick so I went. I made a meager offering of my presence, sharing a listening ear, a compassionate heart. And it was enough. Lying there, worn out in the hospital bed, Jerry talked and talked. He shared with me his struggles with doubt, told me about his family. We talked about Haiti, where we discovered we'd both been involved with the same mission partnership. I didn't have much to offer, but it was enough.

There are a lot of offerings around this old church that we should celebrate. You have created this space, where all are welcomed and valued. Where children are cherished. Where housed and homeless break bread together around a bright blue table. You open your hearts and your homes to one another for small group gatherings and you come on Wednesday nights to share what you learned on your summer vacations. You set the table for communion, you light every candle before Taize, you visit our homebound ones, our sick ones, our dying ones. You come early to teach our children, you stay late to rehearse and sing, you learn and are challenged together, you give what you can to ensure our ongoing witness on behalf of the poor and oppressed with GBM and Faith in Action

² Lose, David, “*Pentecost 24B: Surprisingly Good News*,” In the Meantime... blog, Nov 3, 2015. <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/pentecost-24-b-surprisingly-good-news/>

³ Townes, Emilie, “*Mark 12:38-44*,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Vol. 4*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2009.

⁴ Ibid, p. 186.

and ARLA and Arise. You stand together and bear witness to the promise of the resurrection.

Some days, what you have to offer may not seem like much. But it is enough. It is enough. Looking back, it might just become your whole life. And I thank God for it, and for you.