

## Mark 12:38-44

### Lent 3

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Today's text is written in the Gospel of Mark and is positioned in the narrative shortly after Jesus made his entry into Jerusalem. You will remember that in this gospel Jesus went to the temple right after arrived, he looked around, and then he left. He and his disciples left the city and went to where they were staying the night. When he returned to the temple the next day, he turned over the tables in the temple in order to disrupt what was going on there. He and his disciples, once again, left the city that evening. The next day, on his way to the temple, he was teaching his disciples, they encountered some Jewish leaders who began asking him questions. Once Jesus and his followers came to the temple, the Jewish leaders faded into the background and a larger crowd gathered to listen to Jesus. This is Mark 12:38-44.

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

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

#### Lent in Plain Sight: Coins

Appearances are important. This is true for us personally and in the business world as well. The way in which the public perceives the priorities of a business is important. The truth is, given the choice, people would rather spend their money at businesses that not only provide an excellent product or service, but that align with their values and make a positive impact in the community. We see this play out in our community each time a local non-profit hosts a fundraiser. Businesses give money to non-profits to sponsor the event, and in exchange, the non-profits

make sure the public sees the business' name and logo associated with their fundraisers on t-shirts, posters, billboards, and other marketing materials. It's a win-win-win system. The businesses win, the non-profits win, and the community wins because the non-profits can continue their important work.

But let's say a business supports a non-profit whose mission is to serve people in the community who are food insecure. To do that, the non-profit hosts a daily soup kitchen and keeps a food pantry well-stocked. The supporting business regularly writes checks to the non-profit to be used for their work. And, with gratitude, the non-profit makes a point of publicly thanking the business for its generosity. All of that is okay. There isn't anything wrong with it at all. Does that change, though, upon the discovery that the business, which supplies jobs for many members of the community, doesn't pay a living wage? Or it doesn't offer healthcare benefits, or it uses loopholes to avoid paying taxes? Does it matter that the business' practices contribute to the need for the meals provided by the soup kitchen and the food from the pantry? Appearances are important. The perception of the public who sees the business' generosity is very different than the perception of the employee who can't afford to buy food on the wage he is being paid, right?

This is the tension that exists in our text today. Jesus issued a strong critique of the scribes who cared more about how they looked, and what their privileged position entitled them to, than they did about the people they were supposed to be caring for and the role of the temple in their tradition. To be clear, this critique was not directed at all scribes, just the ones who allowed their leadership to get entangled with the Roman government. We must be careful not to tiptoe into antisemitic territory by making sweeping statements about all Jewish leaders. They were not all corrupt. And realistically, the behavior of this group of scribes is not unique to Jewish leaders or even first century Israel. This behavior, this need for the elite to keep up appearances, to look like they are doing the right things, is common even today in many, if not all, cultures. I bet if we took a few moments, we could make quite a list of people in power, including Christian leaders, who are more concerned about the appearance of doing the right things than they are about actually doing the right things.

It isn't just the elite for whom perception becomes more important than impact. It can and does happen to a lot of people who start out motivated by doing the

right thing and then get a little twisted, lazy, or afraid. Are our bookshelves full of books about racism for all to see, yet we refuse to talk to our white family members about the ways in which we all participate in racist systems? Do we learn to use all the right words as we discuss sexual orientation and gender identity, but steer clear of friendships with our colleagues who are transgender? Do we post on social media about the importance of gender equality and breaking glass ceilings while we privately criticize the success of other women? The thing about motives is sometimes our actions (or lack of action) give them away.

There is a large, expensive marketing campaign going on right now called “He Gets Us.” It is funded in part by the family that owns the notably religious craft store chain Hobby Lobby. In addition, funding has been supplied by other evangelical groups, including a foundation called The Signatry. Most individual donors have kept their identities anonymous. The commercials are a rebranding of Jesus. They tell us Jesus was a refugee, had disdain for hypocrisy, and was unfairly judged like other marginalized members of modern society. So, “He gets us.” In one of the commercials, a black and white slideshow of photos tells the story of Central American migrants who must flee their home to avoid persecution. At the end, the viewer realizes the story was a retelling of the story of Jesus and his parents fleeing to Egypt as refugees.

On the surface, it’s a great campaign and, since we don’t know all the donors, we can’t possibly know for sure what the motivation behind the donations and the campaign are. But honestly, I don’t love the campaign. My critique of the ads is two-fold. First, there is a whole lot of money being spent on rebranding Jesus. On the Super Bowl ads alone, they spent 20 million dollars. The price tag for the total campaign sits at a billion dollars. I wonder...what else could have been done for refugees and other marginalized communities with that billion dollars? The second concern I have with the campaign is that the donors, at least some of them, identify as evangelical Christians. I know not all evangelicals believe the same things, but the overwhelming narrative out of the evangelical church has not been pro-immigrant. It has not been anti-racist. It has not been pro LGBTQ+, so it worries me that these messages will lure people back to their churches, to sit in their chairs and give to their offerings, only to find out these are not safe places.

A colleague and I debated the “He Gets Us” campaign this week. The debate centered on the question, “How can we judge someone’s intentions?” How do we

know a long prayer is for appearance rather than an authentic outpouring to God? And does it matter as long as they are praying? While these questions are not easy to answer, it seems that one way to understand someone's motives is to look at their actions. Do they match their words? In today's text, what seems clear to me is the author of Mark's intention to reexamine value. The things that are valued in the kin-dom of God are different from what the world has taught us to value.

Does God care what the scribes wear or where they sit at dinner? Or does God care about the way in which they care for God's people? Is being a follower of Jesus only about whether we show up at church Sunday morning? Or must it have something to do with how we live and how we treat other people? Should we give money to the church so that our name can be imprinted on a plaque inside the door? Should we use our money on expensive ad campaigns? I have a friend whose pet peeve is churches paying for expensive billboards and yard signs to advertise their Christmas Eve and Easter services. He says spending money broadcasting the obvious is ridiculous. After all, do you know a single Christian church that doesn't have an Easter service? As we reflect on money and how we spend it, we must ask ourselves if what we are paying for is valued by God.

Speaking of value...as we turn to the widow, what value can we assign to the considerably small offering she gives? Does the amount she gives even matter in the grand scheme of things? As Jesus looked on, the widow dropped two copper coins in the treasury and Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. <sup>44</sup> 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." For a very long time, the church has used this widow as a prop for its stewardship campaigns. "Be like the widow. Give it all." We have even compared her sacrifice to Jesus' "give it all" sacrifice. Both sacrificing for something beyond themselves, for the common good. But does the church really want people who are vulnerable to put all their grocery or medicine money in the offering? The Chair of Stewardship-Finance is in worship this morning. Let's ask him. Bret, does the church expect people to give the church the money they need for food or shelter or medicine? (Bret answers)

If that is true, what does the widow's generosity have to teach us? Well, there is something powerful, life altering, and world transforming about this kind of

sacrifice and commitment to community. Absolutely. But I want to be clear, God does not delight in suffering, and certainly not the suffering of someone as vulnerable as the widow. It does not bring God joy for people to go to bed hungry so the church can put billboards along Adams Blvd. God does not need anyone to suffer on God's behalf. There is no denying that the kind of collective thinking modeled by the widow is the kind of collective thinking we are all called to, but it shouldn't fall only to the ones who are the most vulnerable to collectively think and act. The widow in this story reminds me of what Jane Goodall, founder of the Jane Goodall Institute and the Roots & Shoots program wrote, "The greatest danger to our future is apathy."

We cannot tell only the stories of the widow, and people like her, who sacrifice everything, because it would suggest that being faithful should make us willing to set aside what we need completely and trust that God will "bless" our suffering. That theology is dangerous, especially for women and people of color and others who have been socialized their whole lives to think their worth is tied to how much they will sacrifice themselves for other people. The spirit behind drastic acts of generosity and communal living must not be rooted in the lies we've been taught or even the lies we tell ourselves about our worth, but in a practice of mutuality. In other words, I must believe, "My sacrifice will work alongside the sacrifices of other people and together we will create something beautiful for all of us."

God does not only call some people to transform the world. God calls all of us. Theologian Dr. Walter Brueggemann wrote about that people like, "...Martin Luther King [are]was exceptional and dispatched by God in a particular way... but that doesn't let the rest of us off the hook. And the same mandate is available to those of us who are less gifted and all that. We are entrusted with the same vision, with the same scriptural tradition, and with the same work to do." So, the problem with today's text is not the widow's sacrifice. It's that her sacrifice is not being met by the ones in power. What are the scribes sacrificing as they flounce around in their robes and eat at their banquets?

We've been talking about the season of Lent as a journey. It is a journey we are on separately, but it is also a collective journey in which we metaphorically walk with Jesus to Jerusalem where we know his journey ended in cruelty, sacrifice, abandonment, and death. In his final moments, he cried out to God about being

forsaken. How might his story have ended if he had been surrounded by followers trying to intervene, disciples refusing to leave his side, and bodies in the streets, refusing to accept the injustice taking place? His journey might still have ended in crucifixion, but at least he wouldn't have been alone. How many people step up to fight and find they are fighting alone? How many neglect to step up because they fear they will be alone?

The courageous widow, in a world and system in which she was under resourced and the ones like her have their property and security taken away, still gives and still shares what she has for the sake of all. She gave to the temple, not because she had to. Jewish law did not require widows to give. She gave out of hope that if everyone gave, all the ones who were vulnerable, including people like her, would be cared for. God calls all of us to that kind of hope. And we should expect that it won't be just me or just you sacrificing and giving and hoping, but all of us who seek to follow the ways of Jesus.

Sacrifice isn't just about money. For many of us, there are things more valuable than money and one of them is time. What if, for us today, it is our time that is comparable to the widow's gift? We were not created only to get up in the morning, go to work, come home, do some chores, and fall into bed. We were created for community. We were created for mutuality. We are supposed to be a bit like Dorothy from Wizard of Oz, scooping people up along the way and helping them find and receive what they need. Helping each other and thinking about all our resources in terms of how they can be used for the good of all, might be a better way to embody this text than simply filling out an auto debit form. Although, I will not discourage you from that. We are called to sacrifice what we can...money, time, talents and we should raise our expectations of each other. We need to expect that we are all making sacrifices to bring about the kingdom of God right here and right now.

Just as the temple should have been a place in which everyone contributed, the church should be as well. If the church is going to be relevant and continue to be a vital part of the community, it must be a place where everyone can contribute, where everyone's gifts, financial or otherwise are valued and used in ways that honor God. And we must be about the things that matter to God. As followers of Jesus, we must see past perception to impact. Is what we are doing making a real difference in our lives and in the lives of our neighbors? Today, the coins on the

communion table remind us that in the kin-dom of God, generosity is met with generosity. Amen.