

Mark 12:38-44

Pentecost 24 + Proper 27B + November 10, 2015
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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The Lord Lives

The Word of the Lord from Mark 12:42-44: "And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called His disciples to Him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Different people have different value, different worth. That's just how it works in the world. Business professionals make more money than unskilled laborers, and a college degree is worth far more than a high school diploma. Of course, not all degrees are equally valuable, either: me, I have a Masters of Divinity that is so prestigious that I could return to school and immediately begin studying for what they call...a *real* master's degree. But besides that, I'm also the proud holder of a Bachelor of Arts in...Pre-Theology. On the school board on which I serve, the saying goes, "We don't have a theologian, but at least we have a pre-theologian." With credentials like these, if the ministry doesn't work out and I have to look for a secular career, I'm sure I'll find that the world is my oyster.

Scribes have more value than widows: that's just how it is among men in Mark 12. That's why the scribe is walking around in his long robes, happy to allow the *hoi polloi* to greet him. That's why he gets the best seat in the synagogue and the best table at the feast—because he is *somebody*, he's got influence and people add to his worth by paying respect and honor. People also give him money, because scribes get their income from benefactors. They find people who are willing to support them financially, either because of piety or connections or whatever; and, as Jesus points out, they may receive support from widows who are far less wealthy than they are.

Widows have far less value than scribes do. A woman finds her worth in the home as a wife and mother in Judea, and the few jobs for women outside the home usually mean being barred from polite society. To be a widow is to be without means and to be without worth; and to be a widow with no grown children to support her is to live a destitute life.

By the time you've gotten to Mark 12, it's probably no surprise that Jesus warns of the scribe and praises the widow. Among the many wealthy who drop large sums of money into the treasury, He watches one poor widow drop in two small copper coins—two half-pennies. It isn't much. It's not going to pay the temple light bill. It might be more of a hassle than anything: I know how much our offering-counters just love finding loose change in the plate, especially pennies.

After warning of the scribe, she's the one whom Jesus praises. It's not because he's rich and she's poor; and this certainly isn't a text for a stewardship sermon so that you can preach that "she tithed 100%, so why don't you?" Jesus doesn't praise people for money; and anyway, it's no sin to be wealthy. The temptation for the wealthy, though, is that they face a panoply of idols—be it the money, the comfort, the fawning of others or whatever. Poverty has its own set of false gods, like doubt or worry or resentment. All of these idols war against faith.

It's the faith of the widow that brings forth Jesus' praise, and I think we can put it this way: the widow is living on the promises of God. If God isn't true to His promises, then she's got nothing. She is nothing.

The Lord loves widows and orphans. He keeps saying so. He makes laws to provide for them in Deuteronomy. He makes it a special point to curse those who take advantage of them, and He makes sure that all the people hear of it and add their "amen" (Deuteronomy 27:19). Time and time again in the psalms, the Lord loves and upholds the widow and the fatherless. It's as if He loves those who have no worth.

We've got today's Old Testament lesson too. Here's this widow living in the Gentile town of Zarephath, in the area of Sidon. She's down to her last bit of flour before she and her orphaned son starve to death. They would be just two more unknown, forgotten casualties erased from history, except that the Lord sends Elijah to them—to them! He asks her for what she probably treasures most: bread. She responds, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die" (1 Kings 17:12). It's then that the Lord—through Elijah—provides her with flour and oil in wondrous abundance. In the next few verses, He'll raise her dead son back to life. But as you rejoice in the miracles, don't forget her words that put her in the fine company of the widow at the treasury: "The Lord lives, and I have nothing."

That, my friends, is not a bad confession. It's how you started the service: by the time you've finished the confession of sins, you've said to the living Lord, "I have nothing. I have nothing to give, so I am at God's mercy." As Luther says, "We are beggars with empty sacks." The Lord lives, and we have nothing.

But the Lord lives, and He delights in such a confession, for it is only made by faith. He loves those who admit they have no worth, for they are delivered from the lie of believing that they are worthy of His help by their works, their possessions, their goodness and love.

The Lord lives—and more to the point, the Lord who was once dead lives again. Our Gospel lesson is not the last time you find scribes and a widow in Mark. There's one more time: there are plenty of scribes on Calvary, mocking Jesus for His worthlessness: "He saved others; He cannot save Himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe" (Mark 15:31-32). A bloodied, dying king whose throne is a cross and whose crown is thorns isn't worth anything to anyone, it would seem. But you know why He's there: for "you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). On the cross, He is the poorest and most worthless of all, for He bears the poverty of all sin.

There's almost certainly a widow on Calvary too: there hasn't been a hint of Joseph since Jesus was twelve years old. The most highly-favored of women is at the foot of the cross; and she who once sang of God who fills the hungry with good things feels the sword pierce her heart too. The Lord saved the son of the widow at Zarephath, but there's no such miracle on Calvary. Jesus dies. God does not spare His own Son, but gives Him up for us all.

But if God "did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32) Jesus lives again, crucified for your sins and raised for your justification. Jesus lives: and though apart from Him you have nothing, in Him you have all good things. You wear His robe of righteousness. He feeds you living bread. You have a heart sprinkled clean from an evil conscience. You're a child of God and an heir of His kingdom.

You have a Father in heaven who delights to hear your prayers, and to answer them for your best according to His will. In Christ, you—who had nothing—have all things.

It may not appear so to the eye at the parish or the parsonage. It didn't on Calvary, in Zarephath or by the temple treasury either. Churches will have years of famine and years of plenty, and there doesn't seem to be a lot of plenty in the forecast. So beware: the life of the scribe will look pretty good. Plenty of pastors and churches will opt for program and practice that lead to nice seats and big banquets, and they'll do all with the pretense of long prayers. In doing so, they'll devour the homes of widows. Worse, they'll scorn their confession. But you rejoice with the widow, for blessed are those who have nothing of themselves, and who live as if God keeps His promises.

God keeps His promises to you. He can't not be faithful. Don't worry about the worth the world pins on the people of God these days. The Lord declares you worth the blood of His own Son, who bore the poverty of your sin so that you might have His riches. You're His baptized, holy child and the kingdom of heaven is yours, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen