

Sermon: Mark 12:38-44 (Proper 27B)
Christ Church Riverdale, 8 November 2009
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Mark 12:38-44 ³⁸ 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, ³⁹ and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰ They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." ⁴¹ He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³ 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. ⁴⁴ 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."

Take a moment and imagine yourself there with Jesus and his disciples. It's Passover week so thousands of pilgrims are crowding Jerusalem. The Temple treasury had no contribution envelopes; Mediterranean society that didn't have much in the way of privacy and religious giving was no exception. As the people put their contributions, literally threw them—we might say tossed or dropped them--into the chest, your ears told you what was going on. Copper, silver, and gold each make their own sound, and you could hear the different sizes and number of coins, too. When the widow comes forward you hear the faint tinkle of the two tiniest copper coins, smaller than a penny. "She has put in the most of all," Jesus says, "because it's all she has to live on."

Now I promise you this reading isn't put in the fall because of stewardship season! We're basically reading through Mark's Gospel Sunday-by-Sunday, but you can be sure I'm not going to ignore the stewardship implications of this story, even though I think they're different from what people ordinarily think. Sometimes the widow is raised up as an example of how to give compared to how the bigshots aren't even feeling it. Unfortunately the Bible doesn't tell us what tone people say things in. So we aren't told explicitly whether Jesus is saying that giving all she has to live on is necessarily a good thing. In biblical times, widows, along with orphans, were the most vulnerable members of society because they were not part of a family with a man to provide for them and act for them in legal matters. This doesn't mean that every woman whose husband died was destitute, because there was a safety net--provision for her to be taken into the family of her husband's next-of-kin by marriage—this is what we heard about in the reading from Ruth--or if her father were still living, she could go back home. But sometimes widows didn't have either option; this is the kind of widow we have here. She's down to her last two pennies.

Jesus looks at her gift according to the principle of proportionality already present in the Hebrew Scriptures--of giving a tithe, or 10 per cent. Since the widow's proportion was 100 per cent, it was more than anybody else gave. So is this text saying to ignore our needs and just give to the church? No matter how many televangelists use this story to try to bilk the elderly out of

their Social Security, of course not! But it is still about stewardship. Widows who fell through the safety net were among society's most vulnerable in biblical times, but they weren't just left to starve. The Old Testament is full of injunctions to take care of the widows and orphans--to provide for them out of your harvest. Given that, the widow's donating her last two pennies to the temple treasury was a gutsy act of trust. Instead of slinking off by herself in her poverty, I imagine her marching up among the rich folks with her head held high as to say, "You see all I've got left? I'm giving it to God!" knowing that it was the responsibility of the faith community, the responsibility of some of those very people giving to the Temple, to take care of her.

Many elderly and their families have had to become familiar with the law on asset depletion—how once Medicare stops paying for nursing care you have to spend down your net worth to a certain level to qualify to have Medicaid pay for it. By throwing the pittance she had into the treasury the widow was going through asset depletion in the extreme and trusting God to provide for her through people observing the statutes in the Bible set up to protect widows.

And stewardship, my sisters and brothers, is an act of trust. Stewardship is trusting that there will be enough to meet our needs--not all of our wants, but our needs—when we give to God in proportion to our income and resources. For almost 15 years Amy and I have practiced tithing—giving 10 per cent of gross income to the churches we've served. This year my cash salary from Christ Church is \$42,100, and when you add the value of living in the rectory, the church pension fund computes the total as a little under \$65,000. Our pledge to Christ Church this year is \$6500, and we are pledging \$6750 to Christ Church for 2010. This is separate from our ongoing contributions to the organ restoration fund. Could we use some of that money for things we want? Of course we could! But can we trust that God will provide what we truly need from the remaining 90 per cent of income? We've been able to for almost 15 years now, thankful that if it weren't for God, we wouldn't have any of it.

Soon you'll be receiving materials inviting you to pledge for 2010. Now every year stewardship is important at Christ Church. The ways it is important in 2010 have to do with our being in the second and hopefully final year of the recession. This year we cut the budget, came together to dig deep in our giving, and were blessed by the diocese and building users, all of which puts us in a position to end the year in balance provided we all fulfill of our pledges to the church. This is an accomplishment to feel very good about! Now the economy has stabilized and is showing some signs of improvement. We're not out of the woods yet, but from here we can see that we won't be in the woods forever. In order not to cut back on our ministry in 2010 it's going to call on us to stretch our generosity to distinguish between our wants and our needs and then trust God to provide for our true needs.

When you receive the stewardship materials, please take time to pray about them and discuss it as a household if you don't live alone. How has God blessed you, and how are you thankful for those blessings and for the role Christ Church plays in your relationship with God? What proportion of your income or financial resources represents your gratitude to God and your commitment to the ministries of your church? I don't ask you to give like the widow—100 per cent, but I do believe we are all called to trust like the widow!