

**Micah 6:6-8**

**Luke 20:45 - 21:1-6**

**November 10, 2019**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

## **ADDING YOUR TWO CENTS' WORTH**

***Let us pray: O God, teach us your ways of justice and lead us to practice your generosity, so that we may live a life worthy of the gospel made known through your Son Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.***

Last Monday afternoon, the Disaster Recovery Group of Duplin County met in our Fellowship Hall, as it does every other Monday. Most of the meeting was taken up with representatives of partner aid agencies giving updates on the resources they have to offer in the ongoing recovery efforts in Duplin County following Hurricane Florence.

We recently asked the Duplin County School System to help us publicize our meetings by sharing information through the county-wide call system. As a result, we had a number of flood survivors at the meeting who were able to meet with case managers and get information about how to apply for assistance.

Toward the end of the meeting, a disgruntled, angry, and frustrated woman stood up and complained that all of the non-profit agencies (including the Disaster Recovery Group) were receiving lots of money but not using any of it to help flood victims. Interestingly, the woman is not a resident of Duplin County, so some of us were wondering why she was at the meeting in the first place. Also, it turns out she had been denied assistance by some agencies because the damage to her home was not storm and flood related. Needless to say, the atmosphere was rather tense. After a few minutes of back and forth, someone mercifully made a motion to adjourn, which was quickly seconded and approved, and the meeting was over.

The woman made a serious accusation — that aid agencies were appealing for money to help flood victims and then not using the money to help the people who needed help. Fortunately, the accusation is unfounded, and the assistance that has been given and is being given is thoroughly documented. However, if her accusation had been true, it would be an intolerable situation.

Today's story about the widow adding her two cents' worth to the Temple treasury could be an illustration of the accusation the woman made Monday afternoon. This story has traditionally been called "the widow's mite." "M-I-T-E" is a contraction of the Latin word *minutum* which was used to translate the Greek word *lepton*. A lepton was the smallest coin in circulation in Jesus' day, considered by some experts to be the smallest monetary denomination coin ever minted by any nation in history. Two lepta were worth about 1/64 of a denarius, the typical daily wage in first century Palestine. So, the widow's "two cents" were the equivalent of about 7.5 minutes of work — not even enough to buy one sparrow, only enough to buy three grapes.

[Ironically, I found an "authentic widow's mite coin set cross" for sale on Amazon. Here is the description of the item for sale: "Genuine Widow's Mite Excavated

Coin Jewelry with Coptic Pendant is Crafted in Polished 14k Yellow Gold; Gift Box included with Order (Jewelry may not be inside gift box, it will be in separate pouch to keep pristine from rough handling of carriers); Made in USA.” Guess how much this “authentic widow’s mite coin set cross” sells for? \$1,179.88 (but you get FREE Shipping!). It’s hard to compare values 2000 years later, but based on today’s minimum wage of \$7.25, you can buy a coin worth about 45¢ today for a mark-up of 2,600%! There’s a sermon in there somewhere . . .]

By any objective valuation, the widow’s contribution to the Temple treasury was not substantial, at least in terms of monetary value. And yet, Jesus commends her when he says, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.” (Luke 21:3-4) Notice what Jesus *doesn’t* say — “Go and do likewise!” Before we heave too big a sigh of relief at being let off the hook, let’s look more carefully at what’s going on in this story.

If I had only read Luke 21:1-4 this morning, I could have come up with a nifty, compact stewardship sermon — something along the lines of “Look how faithful and generous the poor widow was. If she could do what she did, surely we can do so much more.” Actually, many stewardship sermons just like that have been preached from this story over the years. Of course, that raises the very practical questions: If you put in all you have to live on, what will you live on? Who is going to take care of you? And that gets to the heart of this story, more than holding up the widow as a model of faithful giving for contemporary Christians.

By any estimation, the widow’s two cents’ worth is a breath-taking offering. But this story about the widow’s mite is embedded in a story that takes place on Tuesday of Jesus’ final week. He is hanging out in the Temple with his disciples, debating with the religious leaders, and watching the comings-and-goings of the pilgrims who are arriving in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover Festival.

The story of the widow’s mite is the filling in a gospel sandwich — stuck between Jesus denouncing the scribes and Jesus foretelling the destruction of the Temple. As a worship leader who wears a long, black robe, I sort of cringe when I hear Jesus say, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.” (Luke 20:45-47)

You can hear the verbal connection between that story and the story about the widow’s mite. While the scribes “devour widows’ houses,” the poor widow puts two small copper coins in the Temple treasury, “all she had to live on.” Then there is the connection at the end, between the hustle-and-bustle of the Temple and its coming destruction (which actually happened about thirty-five years later). To be very blunt about it, Jesus criticizes the religious system of his day, a system that accepted money from the very people it was supposed to help, but in the end didn’t take care of them — such as the poor widow with two small copper coins.

As a young man, Francis didn't know what he would do with his life. One day, as he wandered in the hills near his home in Assisi, he entered a rundown church and knelt before the crucifix. He prayed to Jesus, "Lord, what do you want me to do? Show me what you want me to do with my life." Francis heard a clear voice say, "Francis, go and rebuild my church."

The story is told about Francis of Assisi visiting Pope Innocent III to seek the pope's blessing on Francis' life of poverty as he sought to fulfill Christ's calling in his life to rebuild the church, not just the rundown buildings, but the institution of the church itself. The pope welcomed Francis and proudly showed him the large amounts of money and other treasures in the opulent papal palace. The pope made reference to the story in Acts when Peter tells the crippled beggar he has no silver or gold to give him, but he can give him healing in the name of Jesus Christ. The pope pointed to the treasures and told Francis, "Peter can no longer say, 'Silver and gold have I none.'" To which Francis replied, "Neither can he say, 'Rise up and walk.'"<sup>1</sup>

It's a disconcerting fact that Jesus saved his most scathing criticisms for the religious leaders of his day. He didn't criticize what they taught, but what they did — or, to be more accurate, what they didn't do. In today's story about the widow and her two cents, Jesus refers to God's law that is particularly concerned with the poor, the orphan, and the widow. For instance, the law says, "You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this. When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this." (Deuteronomy 24:17-20)

The prophet Micah famously asked, "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?" As we asked in our Opening Sentences, "Shall we bring him all that we own — our finest possessions, our life-savings, our investments and property? Would God be satisfied if we brought everything we possess?" We will sing the answer to those questions in the chorus of our final hymn this morning: "And God will delight when we are creators of justice and joy, compassion and peace: yes, God will delight when we are creators of justice, justice and joy!"<sup>2</sup>

You see, it's not a matter of either/or — either right worship of God or bringing offerings to God. The order and the motivation are important. As the apostle Paul writes about the churches in Macedonia in his stewardship letter to the Corinthians, "they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God." Then they were generous and joyful and gave voluntarily to the ministry to the saints.

I doubt that every one of the rich people who put their offerings in the Temple treasury that Tuesday in Jerusalem was hard-hearted or interested only in meeting the

barest minimum of what was required under God's law. However, Jesus contrasts the widow's attitude and action with the attitude and actions of the scribes and the rich people. His main beef seems to be, what they were saying and what they were doing didn't match up. They were bringing their offerings to God, but they weren't bringing what God required of them through the prophet — to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

Rev. Al Winn was pastor at Second Presbyterian Church in Richmond, Virginia in the 1970's and helped that church develop a visible and effective ministry in the capital city, which still thrives today. He used to tell a story about a church member who came to worship every Sunday. At the end of the service, he would shake the preacher's hand and say, "Preacher, you sure told THEM today." Week in and week out, year in and year out, he said the same thing, or some variation: "You sure told THEM today. . . Preacher, you told THEM what THEY needed to hear today."

One Sunday, there was a big snowstorm. When the minister finally got to the church, the only person there was this particular church member. The preacher thought, "Aha! It's just me and him — no THEM today!" The minister got in the pulpit and preached his heart out. At the end of the service, the member shook the preacher's hand and said, "If only THEY had been here today, preacher . . . if only THEY had been here. . ."3

Some of THEM might not be here today, but here **WE** are. And the Word of the Lord comes to us through the mouth of the prophet, the giving of a widow, and the observations of Jesus himself.

What does the Lord require of us? To do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly with our God. To make our giving match our faith, and vice versa. To be good stewards of the gifts others entrust to us and to use them wisely to help the people they were given to help.

When the poor widow added her two cents' worth to the Temple treasury, she showed where her heart was. And when Jesus saw her and commented on her giving, he showed us where our hearts and our actions need to be.

As I finish this sermon, hear the words of a Franciscan Benediction:

*May God bless you with discomfort  
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships  
So that you may live deep within your heart.*

*May God bless you with anger  
At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,  
So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.*

*May God bless you with tears  
To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger and war,  
So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and  
To turn their pain into joy.*

*And may God bless you with enough foolishness  
To believe that you can make a difference in the world,  
So that you can do what others claim cannot be done,  
To bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor.*

***Let us pray: O God, our Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer: How do we thank you? How do we show our gratitude? Tell us, what do you require in return for all your goodness? O God, show us when to do justice, how to love kindness, and where to walk humbly with you. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This story shows up in several different forms, including a meeting between Thomas Aquinas and the pope. The details as written above are taken from “The Conclave’s Canny Choice,” by Walter Russell Mead at [www.the-american-interest.com](http://www.the-american-interest.com).

<sup>2</sup>*Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), Hymn #769, “For Everyone Born.”

<sup>3</sup>William C. Pender, “A Widow’s Mite . . . a Widow’s Might,” November 11, 2012 at [www.fpcknox.org](http://www.fpcknox.org).