

Tell Me the Stories of Jesus

DO THE MATH

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

During worship on a Sunday in early September, many of you wrote down your favorite story about Jesus or that Jesus told. Since then, I've been working my way through those stories in this fall sermon series, "Tell Me the Stories of Jesus." Today's short story was on the list.

This story from Mark's gospel about the widow's offering in the Temple reminded me of the old joke about the chicken and the pig. One day the chicken said to the pig, "Hey pig, I was thinkin' we should open a restaurant." The pig, looking dubious, said, "I don't know. What would we call it?" The chicken answered, "How about 'Ham-N-Eggs'?" With a look of dismay and fear, the pig said, "No thanks. You'd only be involved. I'd be totally committed!"

What exactly is this story from near the end of Mark's gospel really about? My working title for today's sermon was "The Widow's Offering," but I told Cheryl I would send her a different title later in the week. I had thought about using the traditional title, "The Widow's Mite," but how many of us even know what a "mite" is these days?

Two years ago, Rev. Michael Lindvall preached a sermon on this story at The Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City. Here's how he began his sermon:

I got a phone call Thursday morning from a woman, not a member, who'd walked by the church and seen the title of this sermon posted out front. She was calling to let me know that whoever had put the sermon title on the sign at the corner of Park and 91st had misspelled the word "might." She was very polite, and kindly noted that the word is spelled "m-i-g-h-t." I explained to her that mite, "m-i-t-e," is the word the old King James Version of the Bible used to name the incredibly tiny coin the famous widow donated to the Temple in Jerusalem. The lady on the phone seemed satisfied with this explanation. I didn't explain to her that the translation we'd read in church no longer uses the antique word "mite." Newer translations generally use the English word, "penny," even though many Christians still remember the passage as "the story of the widow's mite." I complimented her on her spelling vigilance and thanked her for the call.

After I hung up, it occurred to me that these two homonyms have rich pun potential. Might (m-i-g-h-t) implies big and powerful. Mite (m-i-t-e) implies precisely the opposite – tiny and powerless. The mite the widow dropped in the offering appeared tiny and powerless, but Jesus tells his disciples that it was just the opposite; it was a big and mighty gift.¹

Isn't that a great story? But what is the widow's story telling us? Does this story about a poor widow putting some money in the Temple treasury tell us all to drain our bank accounts and put it all in the offering plate? And, if that's not what the story is about, what does this story teach us?

In a sense, this story of Jesus is about "doing the math." But sometimes the math just doesn't add up! Math was my favorite subject in high school, especially algebra. I thought I was pretty good at math – until the night Natalie asked me to help her with a math problem when she was a student at Wallace Elementary. I worked on it and worked on it and worked on it. Not only could I not figure out the answer, I couldn't even figure out how to work the problem! I finally called Lee Woodard and asked him for help. Naturally, Lee gave me and Natalie good advice about how to work the problem; but even Lee admitted it was a tough problem! At the time, I guess I chalked it up to "new math." All I know is, when I tried to "do the math," things didn't add up!

That's sort of the sense you get after reading this little short story in Mark 12. The details are very sparse: the crowd was putting money in the treasury; many rich people put in large sums; and a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, a "mite" worth about a penny. Sitting there and watching these worshipers, Jesus "did the math" and said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury."

What sort of math was Jesus doing? How can two small copper coins worth a penny be more than the large sums many rich people put in the treasury? Maybe when Jesus did the math, he figured out the worshipers in the Temple were like the chicken and the pig – the rich people were only involved, but the poor widow was totally committed. After all, the last line in the short story says, "but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." Another, more literal way of translating that last phrase is "she has put in her whole life."

Maybe this sermon could have been a lot shorter today: "She was a widow. She had a mite. She put everything she had in the offering plate. You ought to do the same thing. Amen!" But that doesn't do justice to the widow, to the gospel story as a whole, or to Jesus' teaching. Maybe Jesus wasn't commenting about the amount of money – or even the *proportion* of money – as much as he was commending the widow's sincerity and commitment (as opposed to the scribes and the many rich people who seemed to be making a show of their contributions).

Did you know there were thirteen donation chests in the Temple Court in Jerusalem? Each of the thirteen donation chests (or "treasuries") was clearly labeled as to the purpose for which the money would be used. It would be as if we had thirteen boxes in our church vestibule marked "Light Bill" and "Music Fund" and "Minister's Salary" and "Christian Education Materials" and "Building Maintenance Fund," et cetera, et cetera. Apparently some Temple donors would make a big production out of their contributions – announcing to all who would listen which box they were putting their money in and how much they were dropping in. Maybe that's how Jesus knew that "many rich people put in large sums."

The focus of this story can hardly be about comparing the large sums of the rich people and the two small copper coins of the widow. Instead, the emphasis falls on the final verse of these two stories: “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.” ***She has put in her whole life!***

Shortly after Jesus watched the widow and the rich people put their money in the Temple treasuries, he began the last week of his life. The first story Mark tells in the last week of Jesus’ life is about a woman who came “with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard.” She broke the jar and poured the ointment on his head. Some of the people at the dinner party at Simon the leper’s house were indignant and complained, “Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than a year’s worth of wages, and the money given to the poor.” If you squint your eyes and “squint your ears” (can you do that?), you can almost hear the rich peoples’ coins clanging in the Temple treasury boxes and their public proclamations, “This money is for the poor!”

Jesus had a very interesting answer for the woman’s critics: “Let her alone,” he said. “Why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial.” A footnote on this particular story of Jesus says, “The woman has shown personal regard for Jesus within her ability and opportunity.”

We have a poor woman with two small copper coins. We have an unnamed woman with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment. We have a poor widow who, out of her poverty, gave “her whole life.” We have a Savior anointed for burial, who is about to give “his whole life.” As the apostle Paul writes in Romans 5, “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.”

In early September, after you had told me your favorite stories about Jesus or by Jesus, I planned a preaching schedule. I picked this story for this Sunday on purpose, since the first Sunday of November is traditionally our Stewardship Sunday when the session presents the budget for the coming year. However, as many of you heard me say last Sunday or have read in the November newsletter or in the session’s letter that was mailed out this week, when the session sat down to “do the math” on the 2015 budget, we didn’t think things added up, even though the numbers all worked out. We were most grateful to the members of the Stewardship & Finance Ministry Team for recommending a conscientious and careful budget for 2015. At the end of the session meeting, we were most grateful to the Ministry Team for having initiated a good conversation around the session table about what we think God is calling us to do as the Wallace Presbyterian Church and what we need to do to accept and live out that calling.

The session could “do the math” and come up with a variety of ways to “meet the budget.” For example, we could take the bottom line number and divide it by the 110 (more or less) giving units in the church and send out statements. Or, we could take the bottom line number and divide it by the total number of members of the church and send out statements. We could do this, in order to pay the bills or meet the bottom line or get by for another year.

Instead, the session has asked all of us to join in a season of prayer for a month, to “do the math” as we think about what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ. After I sent Cheryl the new sermon title, “Do the Math,” I started wondering what exactly that phrase means. When I googled it, I found out it means something like, “You figure it out. You put two and two together and see what you come up with.”

So, before we “do the math” so we can fill out a pledge card or write a check for the church treasury, the session is asking all of us to “do the math, to put two and two together and see what we come up with” in light of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ and in light of what we think God is calling us to do in and for Jesus Christ.

When we do *that* math, we figure out that two small copper coins somehow become more than large sums. We figure out that giving our whole life to the Lord is the starting point for our giving to others. We figure out that Jesus giving up his whole life for us is the foundation and motivation for our commitment and giving.

Have you ever wondered whatever became of the poor widow? Who knows? But the same thing could be said of her that Jesus said about the woman who came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment: “Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.” (Mark 14:9)

Friends, as people of faith and disciples of Jesus Christ, let’s do the math, and see if we can’t give ourselves first to the Lord, who has already given himself – his very life – for us!

I found a beautiful prayer I’d like to share with you to close this sermon.

Let us pray: Gracious God, thank you for the work you have given us. We give you our hands to create something of beauty, build something of strength, serve the broken and needy. We give you our feet to lead by example, go where you lead, carry us to worship. We give you our minds to learn more of your world, learn more of your Word, see our work as service to you. We give you our voices to speak kindly of others, share your story with children, sing your praise. We give you our time to work for you, rest and play, worship and pray. Gracious God, thank you for the work you have given us, and for your work of grace on the cross. May our work be your work. Through Jesus we pray. Amen.²

NOTES

¹Michael L. Lindvall, “The Widow’s Mite – Digging Deeper,” November 11, 2012, preached at The Brick Presbyterian Church, New York, NY. www.brickchurch.org.

²Adapted from a prayer by Rev. John Hamilton at the Bethany Presbyterian Church, Bridgville, PA, found at www.bethanypresby.org.