

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 27B)

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Text: Mark 12:38–44

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

You may recall that last month, we gave considerable attention to the interaction between Jesus and a rich young ruler, recorded in Mark 10:17–31. The rich young ruler came running up to Jesus and asked Him what he (the rich young ruler) “must do to inherit eternal life” (Mk. 10:17). The Lord’s response was most curious. At first, Jesus told him to keep the commandments, “Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother” (vs. 19). I imagine the rich young ruler making a mental check by each one for the Bible records the man saying, “All these I have kept from my youth” (vs. 20). Do not murder, check. Do not commit adultery, check. Do not steal, check. And so forth.

To this, Jesus gives an even more curious response, “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (vs. 21). Give your money away. Come follow me. I haven’t seen too many evangelism programs built on this strategy. What do you think the success rate might be if you went door to door and said, “Jesus wants you to give away all your money and property to the poor and then follow Him in faith and obedience”? I don’t recommend it. The rich young ruler’s response is predictable. The Bible says, “Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (vs. 22).

The Lord’s disciples were quite naturally shocked at this turn of events. And Jesus doesn’t relent one bit. After the rich young ruler had left, the Lord said, “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (vs. 24–25).

Contrast this encounter with the one we read about in today’s gospel reading, Mark 12:41–44. There are some rich people. And they are giving generously to offering box in the Temple area in Jerusalem. And Jesus is watching them. Vs. 41, “And Jesus sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering

box. Many rich people put in large sums.” Again, nothing wrong with that. But then someone else comes by, a very unlikely person to catch anyone’s notice. That person is a poor widow.

This particular widow is probably about as poor as you can get, the very opposite of the richer people who are putting in large sums of money. What I want you to see at the very onset, she’s the very opposite of the rich young ruler described in Mark 10. She exemplifies the kind of faith and trust in God’s goodness and loving care that Jesus wanted the rich young ruler to have, the kind of faith Jesus wants to give to all of us. Don’t you desire to have the quality of faith in God that says: God the Father in Christ and by the power of His Spirit will provide for me in body and soul, in the present and the future, on this side of eternity and in eternity itself, even when every physical and material resource is completely spent? Take heart, dear saints, Jesus gives that kind of faith. And He’s already given it to you even if you don’t realize it!

This widow had two small copper coins – worth less than a single dollar, one estimate said no more than 80 cents – and she gives it all away in the offering box. Vs. 42, “And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny.” In those days, there was no social security system. A widow was dependent upon her family to take care of her. Even if she and her husband were rich, the son or the next closest male relative would inherit the family fortune upon the husband’s death. If a widow’s family did the unthinkable and abandoned her to her own resources, she would become most desolate and poverty stricken, quite literally overnight.

You don’t have to read the Bible very long before you realize that the Lord God of heaven and earth had a special place in His heart and mind for widows. We heard in Psalm 146:9, “The Lord watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.” In the Mosaic Law, God’s people were forbidden to oppress widows, orphans, or strangers visiting the Promised Land. Listen to Exodus 22:21–23:

²¹“You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. ²²You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. ²³If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry...

If you want to get on the Lord’s bad side, then treat widows and orphans unjustly. James, the NT author and the Lord’s half brother, has this to say, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” Didn’t we hear Jesus warn

His disciples in today's gospel reading about religious leaders who put on a good show with long prayers and fancy clothes but devour widows' houses (vs. 38–40)? That kind of religion – the kind that preys on the weak and vulnerable rather than caring for them – is an abomination in God's sight.

The special status of widows continued into the early, New Testament Church. There appears to have been a special category in the church for widows. And not every woman whose husband had died was eligible for such a distinction. Listen to I Timothy 5:9–10:

⁹Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, ¹⁰and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work.

You widows, you are precious in God's sight. You have a God who will not abandon you but cherishes you and upholds you with His righteous right hand of grace and power.

We don't know anything about this widow in the Temple except that she gave her entire livelihood, all 80 cents worth, to the Lord's work. It was an act of faith that went unnoticed by everyone except Jesus. Don't forget that fact, we'll come back to it in a moment. According to vs. 43, He calls His disciples to Him and says,

⁴³Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. ⁴⁴For 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 (vs. 43–44).

What do you think Jesus was trying to teach His disciples? Some will say that Jesus meant she gave more *proportionally* than the rich donors. They gave a lesser percentage while she gave 100%. While that's true, it misses the point all together. The widow gave in faith and trust in the midst of her poverty, believing that the Lord who loves the cheerful giver, that the Lord who defends the fatherless and the widow, that the Lord who promises to never leave her nor forsake her will provide what she needs for as long as He wants her to live. The widow gave in faith. The Lord will provide.

I don't know how much you will place in the offering plate today. I know for a fact, I'm not giving 100%. But by God's grace and Spirit, we all can give whatever amount

in joy and faith and confidence that all things belong to God who has richly blessed you with all that you have. That act of giving, regardless of the size, is an act of worship that says, “It’s all Yours including ‘my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses.’ As You have bought me from the powers of sin, death, and Satan, so I give back to you in thanksgiving. All that I am belongs to you, O Lord.”

This widow serves as another preview of Christ Himself will do in just a few short days. Jesus emptied Himself in faith and obedience to His Father on the cross. (c.p., Phil. 2). The widow emptied herself in faith. So Jesus, the Son of God, emptied Himself so that the world could be reconciled to His heavenly Father and live in the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.

One last thing...Jesus sees what escapes everyone else’s attention. Most people wouldn’t notice 80 cents in the offering plate, back then or now. But Jesus does. What you do and give in faith never goes unnoticed. You should never say that your acts of kindness or your faithful service to your family or your devotion to whatever is good and true and honorable is worthless or unimportant. Jesus saw the widow and praised her faith. Jesus sees your acts of faith and devotion and He rejoices over you. On the Last Day, on that great day of the resurrection, you will hear, “Well done. Good and faithful servant, blessed of My heavenly Father. Enter into the joy of the Lord’s kingdom prepared for you before the foundation of the world” (c.p. Matt. 25:21, 34).

Our Lord notices and rejoices in our lives of faith. And if He sees us, who cares what others think or say. Your lives of faith are more precious to Him than all the gold and silver in the world, more beautiful than all creation.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.