

Giving Your All – Mark 12:38-44 - Nov 8, 2015

Many of you may have recognized our reading from Mark's gospel as the incident often referred to as "the Widow's mite." The name naturally enough derives from the tiny offering that the widow dropped into the temple treasury box. However, there is more to the story than just that and people often miss the rest of the story and the implications. Let's take a look and see if we can see some of those deeper meanings.

When I first read this text I was struck by Jesus' promise of condemnation, and the greater condemnation at that! There are many non-Christians (and sadly even many Christians) today who believe that the Church's – indeed even Jesus' – main message is one of condemnation. However, when we actually read scripture we discover that Jesus didn't really say much in the way of condemnation. Only three times in the gospels he is quoted as using this word, and one of those is a parallel in Luke's gospel of the incident here. There are only eleven times the word 'condemn' occurs in the gospels and not all are negative; for example in John 3:17 where Jesus declares he has not come into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved.

So, here in our reading we have a very rare promise from Jesus of condemnation. Who is the target of that unusual promise? Some anonymous sinner? Some scurrilous person who refuses to worship, or who turns their back on God? Well, in a sense, yes – but not who you would think of at first. Those for whom Jesus promised "the greater condemnation" were the crème-de-la-crème of the religious elite! They were the scribes, the learned and respected religious authorities who issued the religious writs, deeds, judgments and other legal documents of the day. Remember that the law, at least the civil law, was based upon the Levitical codes from the Hebrew scriptures. Criminal law was mainly Roman law, but the day-to-day stuff of contracts, deeds, forfeitures and foreclosures was under the scrutiny and control of the priests and scribes, although primarily the scribes.

Were the scribes promised condemnation merely because they were doing their jobs? No, it seems clear that Jesus had two major related complaints against them. His first complaint was against their striving to maximize the perks of their job – wealth, respect, "the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at the banquets." You will likely recognize this as a modern complaint in our society, expressed as a characterization, a description of human frailty, one emphasised in the media regarding Senators, CEO's, and other leaders.

The second complaint by Jesus about the scribes shows us what moved him to predict condemnation – not only that they "devoured widows' houses," betraying the trust accorded to them to implement justice but also that they "prayed long prayers for the sake of appearances." Wow! What price appearances, if the cost is condemnation? It would seem to be a very expensive proposition pretending to be religious just to be called faithful – or is it pretending to be faithful just to be seen as being religious? It really doesn't matter which way around it is pretended, because the real problem is mistakenly believing that appearances are as important to God as they seem to be to people.

Sadly, the church has too often fallen into that trap of believing that God is somehow fooled by appearances and The Presbyterian Church in Canada hasn't been immune from this, either. Somewhere along the way from the days of the church as enthusiastic evangelizers and promoters of social justice in the mid-1800's the church changed to focus on respectability as the main characteristic to be desired, and often took that well into the worship of appearances. One possible reason was the shift from a pioneer environment where social class barriers tended to be shattered to a more settled society in which the emerging social climbers could quickly establish

their position through cloaking themselves with the respectability of the church. Clerks of Session and Sunday School Superintendents were accorded prestige and respect not seen today. Specific pews (“best seats”) were accorded by rank – sometimes even through recognizing significant donations and contributions to the temple coffers. Some of our older churches still have those little doors on the ends of the pews and even ushers to make sure visitors don’t open the wrong door! Today the ranking tends to be by the value of the vehicle in the parking lot of the big campus churches, but the principle is the same.

But not all in this text from Mark is the subject of condemnation, and blessedly we are not left graceless with only a negative example to work from in scripture. In stark contrast against those noted officials who were focused on themselves, and what others were thinking of them, and on how much they could take from the system, we see through Jesus’ understanding eyes a woman of faith focused on giving, acting on behalf of others, dedicated to what she could put into the system.

You see, the central theme of this text is not money. To be sure, money is the symbol used to highlight the differences between the rich scribes and the poor widow, and many a sermon has been preached about how it’s better to be poor than to be rich, or that everyone should deposit their last two coins into the coffers of the church. I wonder if the preachers of these sermons recognize how close they are to saying, “Jesus says he prefers a small offering to a large one” – probably not exactly the message they had in mind!

The message here is about the spirit of giving, the involvement in that giving, and the commitment behind the giving. The implication is clear that those who were making major donations to the treasury were giving only a portion, and a portion that didn’t really hurt. By contrast the widow was giving her all, everything she had. Perhaps on this Remembrance Day Sunday as we think about those men and women who gave their all in service to country and loved ones we might be sensitive enough to hear the faint echo in this passage of the total sacrifice that Jesus himself would come to make, giving his all that those who believe in him might have eternal life.

No, the issue here is clearly not about giving money, although there’s nothing wrong with giving of one’s wealth. The world would not be as good as it is without either the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation or the Presbyterian World Service and Development organization, or all the other charities that help widows and orphans and oppressed poor around the world have access to food and water and housing and medical care. The good work that goes on through massive donations and minuscule donations alike is a testimony to the power of those donations to change lives for the better.

The real issue presented here is the spirit, the motive behind the giving rather than the amount. What is important for those who would be disciples of the One who truly gave his all on the cross is a willingness to give your all. It’s not important if that ‘all’ does not include great gobs of money, or even talent or time … although, hey, all of those are welcome! What is important is that you give your all to Christ, whatever that all may be. If your ‘mite’ can only include a warm “hello, welcome” that gift offered in Christ’s love is more significant and powerful than perhaps you can imagine. If your ‘lepta’ (tiniest coin) only covers a small cup of Tim’s finest but includes an ear to someone who really, really needs to talk, that is a gift for which there is no condemnation.

So, another short, seemingly simple lesson from Jesus that carries a much deeper invitation. At first glance it does seem to be about money, but with a bit of understanding we recognize that really about discipleship, about commitment to God in Christ, about giving your

all. Easy to understand, so difficult to do, and yet I know you here who do give so unstintingly of yourselves would agree that it is also so rewarding, so fulfilling, so comforting, so energizing, so life-giving – just as Christ promised life in Him would be.