

“Giving Her All”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Mark 12: 38-44

Brad Roth is a Mennonite pastor in Kansas, and he talks about how his son’s fourth-grade class did a project in their community last year. It involved using river rocks, like the ones we used on Stewardship Sunday in October, but their class wrote encouraging words and phrases on the rocks and placed them around their town – in parks, by street benches, and so on. They were like fortune cookies – only on rocks – and they included phrases like, “You’re beautiful!” and “Have a nice day!” Roth writes: *We discovered (our son’s) particular bit of basalt encouragement plonked on the kitchen counter: “Survive.”*

It’s less bubblegum bromide than grit-your-teeth reality check. Of course, “survive” might be just the encouragement some people need. It works for me about three-sevenths of the time. Dig in, retrench, hang on by your fingernails.

And yet, we want more than survival. We long for meaning, purpose, a sense that our lives contribute to a good greater than ourselves. We recognize, somewhere deep down, that hanging on by our fingernails does not the good life make.

*Perhaps this is part of what Jesus observes when the widow gives her last mites over to the temple treasury. Rather than clinging to bare survival, she is offering a sacrifice to God (*Christian Century*, October 24, 2018: 20).*

In our passage today, Jesus points us toward gratitude and sacrifice. And the widow’s gratitude and sacrifice is in direct contrast to the religious authorities of her time. Jesus’ condemnation of the scribes was primarily because they were extremely corrupt and did not think first of the least in their midst. They used their religious standing to get the nicest meals, the seats of honor at the table, the bows and curtsies of respect as they walked around town. They put on a show of religious piety, when in fact they were deceiving the very people they served.

I wonder if that is why Jesus notices the widow who comes to give her offering to the church. Instead of all the high priests and scribes who everyone always looks at, he instead notices this old lady, stooped over and unassuming. In front of her are the rich and wealthy, bringing large sums of money to add to the treasury. But all she bears in her hands are two copper coins, which would be like putting a few pennies in the offering plate today. “How dare he notice her and not me, as I place so much more money in the treasury! What about my good deeds? What about all the respect and honor and status I hold in the community? How dare Jesus notice her, and not me!”

Jesus addresses this reaction in the following way: “Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 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.” The rich contributed out of abundance, while the poor widow gave out of her poverty. Abundance versus poverty. They gave part of what they had. She gave all that she had – namely, her life.

A friend of mine used to say that it’s not what you give that matters, it’s what you hang onto that matters (Rev. Ed Wilson). Does that ring true for you, especially as you hear this story? Often when the end of the year comes, and we are budgeting for the next year, we first take into account our resources and then our expenses. We see what it will cost to maintain our home, to pay for necessities such as food and clothing and medical care, and so on. We determine what we need to save aside for emergencies and future savings, and possible entertainment and recreation for us and our families. More often than not, we look first at what we are keeping, before we determine what we are going to give away to others, whether it’s to the church or to other charities.

The widow did not have resources to review, or budgets to compare from the previous year. She didn’t have to think about how to pay for the necessities of life because she lived her life without them – food, clothing, a home, were all items for which she simply scraped by each and every day. She did not first think about what she was going to hang on to, because in all honesty, she had practically nothing to keep. So instead, she came to the treasury and placed in the box what she had, and kept nothing for herself.

Brad Roth continues: *This passage can rub us a little wrong. Middle-class American values instruct us to ladle out life in careful moderation, in frugal dribs and drabs. We maintain control. This is the logic we use to cast stones at the poor, who are forever making what we regard as dreadful spending decisions and giving us ample criteria to judge and reject them. By this standard, the widow’s decision is questionable: she fritters away her last means of support. Yet what catches Jesus’ attention is not her lack of retirement-planning savvy. Jesus is impressed by her commitment to give “her whole life to God.” At a critical juncture, the widow chooses sacrifice over survival.*

It should come as no surprise that Jesus highlights the widow’s example. Jesus is forever calling people to give their whole lives to God. It’s central to his vision of discipleship. Put your hand to the plow and don’t turn back. Leave family. Leave friends. Take up your cross and follow me . . .

Sacrifice can throw us off balance, and yet there’s something deeply human about it. We long to give ourselves away. But to whom? And how? There are many options out there – as Paul says, “many gods

and many lords” eager to receive our lives in sacrifice (1 Corinthians 8:5) . . . The widow gets it right somehow. Her act is a teachable moment, a living parable. She gives her whole life to God. Go and do likewise (ibid).

Or, as Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, perhaps Jesus saw the widow in a slightly different light: “She reminded him of someone. It was the end for her; it was the end for him, too. She gave her living to a corrupt church; he was about to give his life for a corrupt world. She withheld nothing from God; neither did he. It took one to know one. When he looked at her it was like looking into a mirror at a reflection so clear that he called his disciples over to see. ‘Look,’ he said to those who meant to follow him. ‘That is what I have been talking about. Look at her’” (The Preaching Life, 130-131).

That is why we give. That is why we contribute. That is why we come to the treasury box and drop in the last two coins to our name. Not because we feel guilty or proud, but because we rejoice that another has already emptied himself for our very sake. Jesus was the offering to a corrupt world, and has transformed that world into something beautiful because of his gracious act. If we’re not giving to God for that reason, then we need to reexamine the real reason we all are here.

Money is idolatrous. It causes greed, want, and loss of perspective when we focus entirely on its power. Why else do you think Jesus spends so much time talking about it throughout his earthly ministry? Unfortunately, we also bring that idolatry into the church. We see the collection of the offering as an interruption of our worship service, a time when we are asked to make our charitable donation so that the earthly obligations of the church might be met.

Instead of an interruption, though, it should be seen as an integral part of worship. That is because it is the one moment when we can respond to the Word of God in a significant and positive way. It is when we say we are totally dependent on God, and give back to him what first came from God. It is when we focus first on what we give away, and not on what we hold onto. It is when we realize that all of us are poor, no matter our material wealth, and the joy which comes from giving out of poverty is no match for giving out of abundance.

I will confess that I had a lot of trepidation this fall as we prepared to send our oldest child off to college. I was nervous about how much it would cost, how that would impact our lifestyle, how it would all work out. And sure, it would have been different if Erin had chosen to go somewhere that offered her a full scholarship or greater financial aid. But we never wanted our children to go where it would be easier on them or on us – we wanted them to go where they wanted to go, where they felt led to be, and where they would be challenged and thrive in their education and growth.

And if that required sacrifice on our part, then that was what we would do to help them see that dream become a reality. For any of us

who are parents, we know there is always a measure of giving on our part so that our children might have the opportunities we had, or more likely, have opportunities we did not have at their age. For me and Debbie, when we make choices of sacrifice to further our children's future growth, that is fulfilling as parents. And when we visited Erin three weeks ago, that only confirmed the choices and sacrifices we are making.

But here's the thing: despite the extra money we have to put aside each month to pay for college, it's not caused us to start eating ramen noodles and water for every meal. We're maybe not putting back as much in savings as we used to, but we're also able to live the way we've always lived, even with that additional measure of sacrifice. That's my reminder that God will provide for our needs - emotional, physical, spiritual, and material. And it's why we have chosen to increase our pledge to the church next year as we always have every year. The widow is our reminder - and I hope yours, as well - that giving back to God is a faithful act of trust that God has been, is, and always will be with us, no matter what may come.

As we follow the poor widow to the treasury, may we see all that we have as a thank-offering to God. For just as she gave her all to God, may we be led to give our all to our Creator, our Redeemer, and our Sustainer.

Thanks be to God. Amen.