

**SLD11.08.15 Stewardship Commitment
Emory Presbyterian Church
Mark 12:38-44 The Widow's Mite
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"Trembling Trust"

Jesus Denounces the Scribes

38 As he taught, he said, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'

The Widow's Offering

41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴For 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.'

It's Stewardship Commitment Sunday at the synagogue and Jesus sets up camp next to the collection plate so he can check out how much people are forking over. So he can pass comment on it. Outloud. To anybody who happens to be listening. Tacky, right? At the same time, there's just no getting Jesus to behave. There he is, leaning over the basket, looking....

...Not bad....

Wow, this guy gave a lot! 'Course he can afford it.

Look at that cheapskate – invests more in Cirque du Soleil than the Kingdom of God.

Ahhh, now look at that little kid bringing up her allowance – isn't that sweet? She's being trained up right.

But now this guy makes a fortune.... What?! Are you kidding me? You can do better than that!

And so forth, as the more, and less, faithful bring forward their annual pledges.

Until up to the altar shuffles this gnarly old woman, a widow, dressed in black, hunched and limping from an aching hip. Above the collection basket she lifts a trembling hand, and from her knobby, arthritic palm tumble two dull and dented copper coins.

They take little room in the basket, these widow's mites; just lose themselves amidst the other change. But for Jesus, the woman's paltry offering rocks the universe, shifting everything a little closer to the kingdom.

Immediately he calls his disciples to share what he's just seen.

Y'all come on over here and see this, he calls to them. .

See what? they ask one another as they crowd in closer.

Move over, Andrew, I can't see what he's pointing at.

What's he's talking about?

He's pointing to the collection basket.

How come?

I don't know. Because it's so full?

No, he's holding up a couple copper coins.

I thought you weren't supposed to take money out of the basket.

Hush. He's trying to teach us something.

Yeah, what else is new?

Truly I tell you, says Jesus, this poor widow has put in more than everybody else who's contributed today, for everyone else contributed out of their abundance, while this woman, out of her poverty, put in everything she had.

Well, mumbles Peter, that might preach but it sure ain't gonna pay the bills.

And I have to say, he has a point. It costs a lot to run a church, keep up the facility, pay the staff, the utilities, the mission commitments. 'Course, Jesus never had to run a church. But obviously he's less concerned about how much anyone gives than the stakes they have in giving it. What impresses Jesus in this particular stewardship line-up is less the low hanging fruit of the risk-averse rich than the profligate offering of the trusting poor. *That's* what rocks his world. People who give even when they don't have much. Even when they feel insecure. Even when it's scary.

Why?

Because this requires trust. In God.

If your offering doesn't strike you as a little scary, a hair alarming, maybe even a little foolish in the eyes of your accountant, well, that's okay. It just ain't gonna rock Jesus' world, or yours. Or count for much as a spiritual practice. That's okay. We all move at our own pace. God loves us even when our trust doesn't tremble. Or maybe you don't see the connection between finances and faith.

You know, every church has its 'kingdom moments' and its 'bottom line moments' but rarely do they coincide. Finance hardly ever meets with Worship. And you couldn't get somebody from the Worship committee to show up at Finance. Have you ever seen a Sunday liturgy based on generally accepted accounting principles? Or the choir sing 'Money Makes the World Go Around?' Generally speaking, we Presbyterians prefer to worship God in *this* moment, and tackle our challenge budget in *that* one. But today's story doesn't let us get away with that. In today's story, faith and finances collide. In today's story, money matters and kingdom matters unite; in today's story, trust and the

treasury join hands and dance an awkward little minuet, and Jesus' disciples just have to deal.

As they did a couple weeks ago when Jesus told the rich, rule-following fellow to sell everything he had and give it to the poor. Made that fellow sad 'cause, really, he just couldn't do it. But in case the disciples imagined Jesus meant only to challenge the rich, today's story serves to set 'em straight. Because today's story highlights the fact that the key to the awkward dance between faith and finance is not quantity, but *risk*.

So I ask myself, what would it be like to march straight up to the offering plate and plop down the account number for my 403b? (That's my retirement account) There, take it, God. The entirety of my retirement savings, dedicated to your glory. This is what I'm willing to risk for you, Lord. This is how much I trust you.

Not likely to happen.

But is this what Jesus is going for?

I remember seeing a cartoon of an IRS tax form. On it there were only two lines. At the top – “how much did you make?” At the bottom – “send it in.”

Is this what the gospel requires of us? “How much do you make? Give it to the church.”

Well, It is what Jesus asked of the rich young ruler. And what Jesus gave himself. So, yes, there is a sense in which the gospel does, indeed, ask of us everything we are, everything we do, everything we have - the whole Magillah of our earthly existence. No more and no less than what Jesus gave on our behalf.

But who can do that? Most of Jesus' disciples, then and now, can locate ourselves somewhere on the continuum between the rich man who couldn't risk

everything he had, and the widow who could. Most of us find ourselves somewhere in between; to where we live reasonably comfortably but are willing to take a little risk. But how much? How much risk, that is. Together Jesus' stewardship stories seem to be pointing not at how much is given, but what's at risk in giving it. What's on the line? How much risk can we bear? Is there any tremble in our trust?

Usually a Stewardship conversation goes something like this: you gotta an awful lot; won't you give a little? That may be our conversation, but it's definitely not Jesus'. Because Jesus is talking about risk. About trust. About faith. And his conversation goes like this: 'since you don't have all that much, what would it be like to risk giving a little more, out of your poverty?'

Crazy guy. Or is he?

For, the way I see it, from the moment the widow places her poverty into that basket, she becomes invincible. Free. *San souci!* Nothing can touch her. The whole universe supports her. Suddenly she rests in the palm of God and it will not be moved. Not because of how much she gives but because of the faith and trust out of which she gives it.

This is the place out of which Jesus asks us to give: not from the abundance of our assets but from the poverty of our faith. Not from the carefully managed household budget but from the profligate, imaginative, household hope. Not from some somber, sad sense of duty but from a genuine delight of sharing what we have, and, in so doing, growing our faith. Not 'you gotta a lot; won't you give a little? But, 'since you've only got a little, how 'bout risking a lot and seeing what happens?'

This is not something to worry over too much about it, though. For one thing, a lot of a little ain't all that much, right? Out of her poverty, the widow gives only two copper coins worth a penny. Still, her challenge to us today is, out of our poverty, what will we risk?

As we come forward with our pledges to place them in the basket Olivia will hold for us, please also take a penny from the bowl that Andrew is holding. And take the penny with you as a reminder both of the poverty of our faith, *and* of the abundance received when we risk giving out of it.

To the glory of God. Amen.

For the trust, the faith, the surrender of that trembling hand, why, it's everything he's tried to teach them!

On the other hand, is it fair to ask the same sacrifice of the poor widow as of the rich ruler? Should the most vulnerable bear the same burden as the very wealthy? And think about to what the widow is giving her all – the corrupt, flawed, institutional church of her day, the one Jesus has just described as housing holy hypocrites and money-grabbing scribes. Was the synagogue then worth the widow's all? Is the church now worth ours? Hardly.

['Course, good thing Jesus didn't ask the same thing?: is humanity worth my all?]