

As with last Sunday's Gospel reading, Jesus is in Jerusalem in the days before his death. This morning, he is speaking in the temple, warning about those who serve in the office of scribe. At first, it seems he is only calling them out about their tendencies to be showy in public appearances, their desires for respect and kind greetings, and their long prayers that are meant to draw attention to themselves. Yet, into this Jesus inserts a not at all subtle condemnation.

To set the context, in biblical times, a woman could not own property or directly receive an inheritance. If a woman's husband died, a male relative would serve as what we would call a trustee, and be in charge of distributing a regular allowance from the man's estate to his widow. If there was no male relative, a scribe could fulfill this trustee function. Yet, scribes were not running a legal aid service or temple charity. Scribes assessed fees to manage an estate's assets, and given there was no official fee structure for doing so, nor any oversight or audit, some scribes took advantage. In our lesson, Jesus will assume the role of auditor and advocate, charging the scribes with devouring the widow's houses, or in another translation, cheat them out of their houses. Let's hear Jesus' condemnation in the initial verses of our lesson.

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

Jesus then left the temple, and seems to be sitting alone, across from the temple treasury. He would have seen thirteen trumpet shaped containers. Their flared tops would easily accept the largest coin, but they narrowed so no hand could reach in to grab an offering for themselves. When he sees a widow make her offering, Jesus calls his disciples to join him.

In the church, we have uplifted this widow and her offering of two copper coins equal to a mite, a penny. Yet, it is not clear Jesus is admiring the widow's offering, much less advocating others follow her lead. Jesus' words sound more like a simple observation, a point of fact, which also reveal and remind the reader of a social injustice. We continue our lesson in Mark 12.

⁴¹ *Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums.* ⁴² *A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.* ⁴³ *Then 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.* ⁴⁴ *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."*

I suspect it must have been Sunday school where I learned about tithing. Our parents were faithful and consistent pledgers, and contributed to special causes in the church and community, but never to my knowledge did they set aside 10% of their income. Yet, when my weekly allowance in high school was set at \$5 a week, which was to cover the carton of milk I'd buy to go with the bag lunch I took to school, I also began giving fifty cents a week to the church. With the exception of college days, when it was so much easier to catch up on sleep on Sunday mornings, that discipline of tithing to the church has continued to this day.

For a good number of years, Lynn and I have had a single checking account, but use up to six different check registers. It is similar to the cash envelope system some of you, or your parents, or grandparents may have used, where at each payday, cash for groceries is put in one envelope, clothing in another, gas money in another. For us, one of our registers is for what we call our tithe checkbook, into which we distribute an amount equivalent to 10% of our income each month. While a bit of a complicated system, it allows us to know where we are spending our money, and sets aside our tithe off the top, money we will give to support the church and other organizations committed to the work of peace and justice.

Now to be clear, the biblical tithe emerges from the Jewish law, as we heard it briefly outlined in our Deuteronomy 14 lesson. I have always found it interesting how the three uses of the biblical tithe parallel our life and ministry in the church.

One use of the tithe was a feast, a potluck supper if you will, that is to be enjoyed by the whole community, old and young, rich and poor. The first fruits of harvest and livestock were brought, not to be burnt as a sacrifice, but eaten in thanksgiving. So, one purpose of the biblical tithe is for the faithful to gather for a communal thanksgiving to God for providing for their needs. It encompasses the worship, fellowship, care and spiritual life of the church rooted in God's love and faithfulness. For Israel, this was linked to the exodus out of Egypt and the eventual settling in the Promised Land, where they would harvest their own food.

The two other uses of the tithe also have parallels in the church to this day. One was to care for the Levites, the clergy, who led worship and ritual observances, and were teachers of the faith. We recall the tribe of Levi did not receive a share of land at the times it was divided among the other eleven tribes of Jacob. The Levites were therefore dependent on the tithes of the fields and flocks of others for their provision. The church continues to care for clergy and ministry staff, who remain, in a very real sense, dependent on the generosity of church members.

The third designated use of the tithe was to care for the immigrant, orphan, and widow; in other words, the poor and fragile, the least and lost among them. This was a combination of cultural hospitality and an understanding the community was not whole unless all community members had food and care. In the church, we call this mission.

Neither Jesus in the Gospels, nor other New Testament writings carry over the Old Testament law on tithing to be a mandate. Paul promotes generous donations by stable churches to struggling Macedonian churches, suggesting one never knows when you might need the favor returned. He also encourages cheerfulness in giving. If anything, Jesus suggests tithes have become a ritual without such cheer or joy. If there is any mandate he issues it is not 10%, but 100%. He called his disciples to leave everything behind, and the rich young ruler who was told to sell everything and give it to the poor. Followers of Jesus might be heard saying, "Tithing of 10% is so Old Testament."

The commendation Jesus gives the widow is not her two coin offering, for I expect he would tell her to pocket for her own needs. Jesus uplifts a clear controversy. He has called out the scribes for devouring widow's houses, and thus perpetuating their poverty. If we simply adore the widow's generous stewardship, we ignore the injustice of her poverty. So, today, as we consider our own giving, we are called to connect with present day injustices and inequalities, of both resources and denied access to those resources.

The widow's mite, the giving of everything, aligns with Jesus' own giving of his life. So, it would seem we are now to consider our giving not at a level of 10%, but 100%. This also aligns with the early church recounted in Acts, where believers pooled everything they had, and then distributed to each according to need. Yet, this morning, let's deal with the reality that is not the church we have today. As such, I am thinking of tithing as a good first step toward the giving of everything Jesus asked of his followers and witnessed in the widow and her mite.

While 10% is admittedly arbitrary, and obviously not close to the 100% standard, I have found setting aside a tenth, or more, is faithfully freeing. It removes the question about whether there is enough. Admittedly, it may cause one to postpone one's wants, but I guarantee those who give away nothing, still have unfulfilled wants. Yet, when one's giving is planned, one does not regard it as an interruption of other plans or desires or wants. Planned giving can thus become a joy, rather than a burden.

Looking back at our own practice of tithing, we have given 9-11% of our income, including my salary and housing allowance, to the church of which we are a part. Since church staff salaries are public in the annual report, you can do the math, but I will share it with you. When I was about to begin here, we discussed a weekly contribution of \$125 a week, knowing this congregation also had special offerings to which we might contribute. Yet, wouldn't you know it, I began my ministry just at the point when the stewardship team was asking for people to increase their pledges in anticipation of some longer range planning for the church. So, even before we wrote the first check, we reset our pledge at \$150 a week. I suppose we could give more, because we also tithe the church's contribution to our medical and pension dues, money we never see. We choose to use this for special offerings and to support everything from public television and radio to human rights organizations. Now inevitably when I speak of tithing, someone will ask if we calculate the 10% before or after taxes. For us, it is before taxes, but that is not the point.

My sharing of our tithing practice is meant as an encouragement to others to find a way to set aside your commitment so it becomes a first fruit offering, off the top, which can then be given with joy. The alternative is often to base one's giving on what is leftover, which can become a burden and lead to resentment in giving.

Sometimes, I approach and appeal for giving with a kind of "you go first" syndrome. Few of us want to make a huge contribution to an organization only to find out everyone else gave a pittance. And who really wants to double their pledge to this congregation in 2016 if one is the only one to do so? So, we think, "You go first, then I will follow." The problem in most churches is we never let anyone know what we give. We never talk about our giving, thinking it will be heard as bragging, and I realize you may be thinking that about me in sharing our pledge level, but I can tell you we have never been the top givers in any church we have served. If anything, my concern with sharing would be that those who give more might decide to come down to our level!

In the culture of the church, or perhaps our Protestant upbringing, we consider our giving to be private and should be kept a secret other than to the revolving counters who have to deposit and account for our donations. We might even use such phrases as, "My giving to the church is between God and me."

Friends, if we can tell each other about the new car we plan to buy, the cost of which everyone knows, or the trip we plan to take, or the room in our house we plan to renovate, then why can't we tell each other if we plan to increase our pledge to the church, or even be glad to share how much we do give? I mean if I think everyone else is giving \$10 to a cause, that is about what I am going to give as well. That may be all I can give, but if I know others are giving ten or twenty times more, and I can do the same, I need to know that as well.

It seems to me setting the widow before us as an example of one who gave her all, even as she stood next to the rich who gave just a fraction, is an incentive for us to increase our giving. Those giving 10% might consider that a starting point and begin to move to 15%. Those who give 5% might begin to make a 1% per year increase toward a full 10%. And those who give nothing to the ongoing costs of this church's ministry, are encouraged to make a pledge to the regular operating budget, from which all our ministries and missions flow. When we honestly consider our giving, and plan it by setting aside the first fruits of our income, giving becomes a joy.

Also, when we do more than simply admire the widow's extravagant offering, we will realize we are standing with her, and she is a part of our community. So, it becomes our mission to remove the injustice of her poverty, and in so doing, moves us toward knowing the wholeness of community Jesus intends for his church and this congregation as well.