

Sermon: All In
Exodus 23:14-17, Mark 12:41-44

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Celebration Sunday, 10/30/16

Exodus 23:14-17

Three times in the year you shall hold a festival for me. You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread; as I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. No one shall appear before me empty-handed. You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall observe the festival of labor. Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord God.

Mark 12: 41-44

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

Sermon

If at all possible, don't be like the widow in this story. Jesus looks at the people giving to the temple treasury and sees a widow who gives her last two coins, worth about 1/64 of a typical days wages for a laborer. What foolishness. She now has nothing to buy food with to feed herself, she has nothing to pay for goods or services. She has nothing left for basic needs. By giving her money to the temple treasury she is, in essence, committing suicide. What would drive someone to such extremes?

We know that women are particularly vulnerable in Jesus time, that they had little power on their own. And so a widow, a woman without a husband, would find it difficult to provide for themselves. We also have a line, just one verse before today's text, that may give insight into the plight of widows at that time. Verse 40 says, "They (Scribes) devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." They devour widows's houses. It may be that when there are no more men - husbands, fathers, sons, brothers - when there is no man in a house, that the religious authority then take ownership of the house. In a perfect world, they would be guardians of the house and those in it, working to provide assistance and maintain the family. But it would seem that some authorities have begun taking advantage of the arrangement and causing further hardship.

Douglas Hare: "The widow's suicidal gift is awe-inspiring, like the self-sacrifice of the martyr, but it is not to be encouraged. Within a century of Jesus' death some "Christians sought martyrdom in order to make the greatest possible religious sacrifice. The church wisely condemned such behavior. Martyrdom was not to be avoided by cowardly renunciation of the faith, but neither was it to be pursued as a religious goal. The same applies to the economic martyrdom of the widow."

Jesus doesn't ask us to give the church money that could be used to feed our family or keep a roof over our heads. He doesn't ask for us to take our entire income and place it in the offering plate each Sunday, leaving us with nothing to live on.

And yet, Jesus still lifts up the widow in the story. He identifies her as giving more than any other. Maybe it is the juxtaposition of the widow and the rich that Jesus wants to point out to the disciples. Jesus just got down pointing out the hypocrisy of the scribes, and now he points to the rich who seem to come giving as a show of their wealth, their power, their faith. They make a show of placing their offering in a way that Jesus can see the quantity from a distance. They give to "act" religious, even as they live in ways that counter that act.

It is interesting to me that Jesus' doesn't reprimand the rich for giving nor the widow for her foolish offering. He only asks the disciples to observe, to understand what it means to truly give.

So today we make our pledges for 2017, promises for what we will contribute to the mission and ministry of White Lick Presbyterian in the coming year. And often we take a

moment to think about how much we can afford to give, how much we are being called to give. Can I get to 10%, a tithe of my income? Maybe things are a bit tighter and I need to give a bit less than a tithe. Can I give more than I did last year, step up my giving by 1% or maybe 2? Or has something changed in my life that causes me to stay where I am or even need to lower my giving? These are the questions that you have already pondered or will ponder in the days going forward. And these are essential questions that you will need to answer.

But the story of the widow isn't about how much, it is about how we give. The last verse includes the phrase that she gave, "all she had to live on." A more literal translation of that phrase would be that she gave, "her whole life." Maybe that is the more important question to ask, are we willing to dedicate our whole life - to give ourselves fully - to God's grace. Not just what we put in the offering plate, but what we put into our homes and on our tables. Not just what time we give on Sunday, but also the time we have to give on Monday through Saturday. We are not called to be occasional Christians, followers of Christ when it suits our wants and desires. We are called to live fully as disciples. For all we have, all that we are, everything is already God's. May our giving and our living reflect God's grace, this day and every day. Amen