



Remembering What We've Been Given

Mark 12:38-44

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Good morning, and happy November! It's been nice in the past week to enjoy some truly fall weather, with highs in the mid-50s, inviting a cozy sweater, warm cider, and outdoor activities that don't involve 80% humidity!

Today, we are celebrating All Saints Day. The celebration of All Saints on the First of November dates back to at least the 8th Century, but the celebration of the saints and martyrs of the church dates back even further.

Generally, All Saints is a celebration of those whom we have witnessed as faithful disciples of Christ, who have taught and passed on the faith, and who we can claim with some certainty have "attained heaven." In the Catholic Church, where "sainthood" is a more official thing, every day is attributed a patron saint. For example, today's feast in the Catholic Church is in honor of the patron saint of Perugia, Herculaneus of Perugia, who was a bishop and martyr in the sixth century.

But, for as much as All Saints Day is a remembrance of those who have visibly led a life of faithfulness, who we can easily acknowledge and remember as our ancestors of great faith, All Saints Day is about far more than just those who may stand out as recognizable and rememberable. All Saints Day is about the promise of Christ's faithfulness that leads us into greater faith, and about the invitation we are offered to live in the footsteps of those whose witness has come before us. All Saints Day is about remembering what we've been given.

You've heard me say before, the scriptural stories of our faith are not written in isolation, and neither should they be read in isolation. Every pericope – or short excerpt of the scriptures – stands connected the full witness of the text, both that which precedes it, and that which follows it. Today's scripture offers another good example of how, when isolated from its context, the scripture loses some of its intended impact.

The story of the woman and her two mites is a popular story in the Christian faith.

Jesus sits down in a location where he can watch the treasury of the temple, the location where the Jews would come to give their tithes and offering. I think it's important to note that the treasury was located in the Court of the Women, a section of the temple just inside the temple walls. This was as far as the women were allowed to go on Temple grounds; they were not allowed into the inner chambers. This division is still visible if you visit the Western Wall of the Jerusalem Temple today, where there is a space for the men to go into the temple for prayer, while the women are only allowed to go the external wall.

Because the treasury was in the Court of the Women, the women were able to make their tithes to the church without having to access the inner courts.

In the treasury there were 13 boxes set up around the room that collected people's financial gifts. On top of these boxes were bronze funnels that helped ensure the coins made it down into the box. When you dropped your coins into the funnels, because of the metal on metal clinging, the more you gave, the louder the audible announcement of your giving would be. It would be similar to dropping coins into one of the red buckets for the Salvation Army – there's just enough slope in the lid to their money buckets, that if you drop coins, there's some clatter before the coins drop down into the bucket itself.

The scripture notes that many rich people put in large sums. Their giving would have been recognizable by the clanging of the coins in the bronze funnels. Those who gave more would have received more recognition by others in the room because of the noise generated when they dropped in their giving.

Amidst those who were giving large sums, a widow came forth to give, and she put in just two small copper coins, which we're told are worth only a penny. In Luke's Gospel, we are told these coins are called mites. But honestly, the kind of coin she gives is insignificant; what matters in this story is that the amount of money she gives is insignificant. Her giving is worth just a penny.

When she gives, when she drops in her two coins, unlike those who gave large sums, no one would have noticed her giving. Her coins wouldn't have caused the same volume of clanging. In reality, she probably ensured that her coins didn't make any noise at all – she wouldn't have wanted to draw attention to how little she had to give. She probably laid her two coins gently down the center of the funnel so as to not embarrass herself, highlighting how little she was giving compared to the others who brought pouches full of coins.

Jesus witnessed the widow's giving, and he called to the disciples. We don't know if the disciples have been watching the treasury with as much interest as Jesus, but Jesus tells them, "This poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

In a true to form message for All Saints Day, we could look at the woman's giving and celebrate that it is not just the wealthy, nor their large gifts, that are worthy of sainthood. Jesus indicates this woman's gift, her penny to the church, is as valuable a statement of her faith as the large sums given by the wealthy. Indeed, Jesus says, her giving is of greater value than those who gave more money. It is right and worthy to celebrate the saints of the church, whether wealthy or poor, because it is upon their witness our faith is built.

And yet, this story is not isolated from the text that surrounds it. The impact of this story should not just be about the sacrificial giving of the widow, because, in context, the intent of sharing this widow's gift is part of a larger point Jesus is trying to make.

As we back up to verse 38, we find that Jesus is in the temple teaching. He's in the hub of the Jewish faith, surrounded by scribes, pharisees, Sadducees, and Jews from all around the land of Israel.

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, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at the banquets! They devour widow's houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

Professor M. Eugene Boring educates that the wearing of long robes was not about how long a robe the priest wore for worship. Instead, he offers, the concern is those priests who were wearing religious garments designed for special occasions out in the market place on any given day so that they might be acknowledged and recognized as people of importance even outside the temple walls.ⁱ The concern wasn't that priests wore robes in worship, but that they utilized their role of temple leader to demand respect even when not in an official capacity.

It would be similar to me wearing a clerical collar or stole to go grocery shopping or to walk through the farmer's market in the town square. It would serve no greater purpose than the hope of other's acknowledging me and giving me respect for my position as a pastor.

Jesus's condemnation is not that the priests are priests, or that they lead worship in clerical attire. As Saint Augustine comments, we should not beware of the scribes because they are scribes, or because the scribes hold the chief seats, but instead "because they love them."ⁱⁱ The concern is that the scribes use their seats of honor or their clerical attire for their own glory and fame - for their own honor and wealth. And in using their position for their own glory, they take advantage of those around them, causing others to sacrifice for their priestly well-being.

This concern is not just a first-century Jewish concern. "Some religious leaders have sought fame and wealth in every place and time."ⁱⁱⁱ As scholar William Placher states, "Twenty-first century widows can be as vulnerable to smooth-talking preachers as first-century widows were to smooth-talking scribes."^{iv}

Widows were a protected group of community members in the Jewish faith. Because of societal practices, widows had no safety net or protection. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, we find instructions for the community to care for the widows, to provide for them, and to ensure their well-being.

In this text, Jesus is chastising the scribes who, along with wearing their long robes and seeking attention and worth for themselves, "devour the widows' houses". This is such an odd phrase, and leaves the situation to be imagined. What did it mean to "devour" a widow's house? Did the scribes offer a predatory loan to the widows that they might be able to have a house for themselves, only to set the interest so high the widow could never pay the loan back? Did they repo the house should a widow fall too far behind in her payments? Did the scribes refuse to support the widows in the community, failing to offer them the kind of charitable care that the scriptures required? Did they insist that the widows give to the church all the money they had available to maintain a "worthy" standing in

the Jewish community? Were the widows expected to give more than 10%, a Biblical tithe, just to maintain the same kind of value in the community as the wealthy who gave less than 10%?

When we start to consider what Jesus was saying in verse 40 in condemnation against the scribes who devoured the homes of widows, the story of the widow's giving in verses 41-44 begins to take on a new purpose. The story of the widow's giving two worthless coins is not a standalone text, but instead stands in juxtaposition to Jesus' condemnation of the scribes devouring the homes of widows.

As we look at the text in more detail, we find that Jesus never speaks to the widow to congratulate her on her giving, nor does Jesus praise the widow for her giving among the disciples. Jesus never lifts up the widow as being a model to be emulated. Instead, Jesus simply contrasts the widow's giving to that of the more wealthy who were giving more; he highlights the difference between the wealthy who were giving from a place of abundance rather than the widow's giving from a place of poverty.

I don't critique this text to try and diminish the widow's sacrificial giving; in truth, Jesus does name a number of times the importance of sacrificial giving. Just consider the rich young ruler, who, though he kept all the commandments, was told to sell all of his belongings and to give the proceeds to the poor.

No, instead, I want us to hold the witness of the widow in the tension the story offers as it contrasts the widow's giving against the public affirmation that is sought by the scribes and the wealthy. In these two stories, as they are set up with and against each other, Jesus is making an argument against the visible and audible claim and public declaration of one's self-worth and importance. "Like the Scribes screaming "See me!" with their long robes and special public attention, Jesus saw how the Treasury temple offering system was designed to give attention to people who put in the most money." Like those who demand their name be attributed to a building they helped fund, Jesus is critiquing the personal claim and public declaration of one's worth and wealth as it is on public display in the temple forum.

As I consider this framing on All Saints Day, I want to reflect back on the impact of the saints who have come before us. As we think about the witness of the church, I want us to consider our invitation in the Gospel text to claim the witness of the saints as we seek to be faithful ourselves.

Recently, Dana Payne and I were able to attend the Allyship Summit with Service Never Sleeps, a local organization working for social justice and racial equity. In the training, we had a presenter who was asked about what he looks for in allies. What do you need most in allies in the work of racial equity? His answer surprised me. He said he wants allies to be temporary. *Temporary*.

He explained, he is not looking for allies to be performative, or to seek recognition for being allies. He is not looking for people to claim some form of self-affirmation by being an ally. He is not looking to give affirmation to others for being allies. He does not want people to stick around so that they can prove their worth or their dedication as allies. He is not looking for allies to mimic the scribes and the wealthy, seeking public affirmation for their demonstrative participation in the work of equity.

No, he wants there to be equity. He doesn't want to have to rely on allies in the long-term for the safety, worth, or communal well-being of his community. He wants allies to be sacrificial in their giving now so that they don't need to be allies for long, because through a truly sacrificial community, equity might be realized for all.

When I reflect on the impact of the saints in my life, my mind is not first drawn to those who sought personal and public affirmation for their witness or faith. It is not the visible moments of acclimation that I remember from those who have walked the journey of faith before me. What I remember are the quiet moments of dedicated support provided to me by humble youth counselors, who sat with me in my teenage anxiety; I remember the mentors who sent me text messages of affirmation when I graduated college; I remember the teachers who pushed me to be able to achieve on my own, so as not to become reliant upon their instruction; I remember the coaches who spent extra time pouring into me, as a person – those who listened to how my classes were going, and were genuinely interested in developing me as a person more than an athlete.

The saints that stand out in my mind as those who made an impact are not the ones whose names are inscribed upon memorial funds, it is those whose impression is left on my heart.

Yes, Jesus invites us to consider the impact of the low-income widow in contrast to the wealthy of the community. But just as much, if not more so, Jesus invites us to consider the faithfulness of the witness of those who are fully invested in the work of God for the purpose of God's will over and above their own recognition. Jesus seeks the redemption of God's creation. Jesus calls for our participation in the reconciliation of humanity over and above any celebration of our own participation. The call of the Biblical text is for the shalom – the peace – the well-being of the community on the whole, where widows need not fear the predatory lending of the scribes, or the fear of living without enough funds to buy groceries. Jesus desires the fulfillment of God's will, in a world where allies aren't needed for justice and equity, but where each and every one of us is seen for the worth we have been endowed the image of God.

As we celebrate and remember the saints, may we remember that which we have been given – a witness of something greater than ourselves – a witness of God's love made manifest in the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Christ. A witness declared more faithful in the widow's sacrificial giving than in the change offered by those of great wealth. May the witness of the saints who have come before us lead us in our own faithful witness. Amen.

ⁱ M. Eugene Boring. *Mark: A Commentary (The New Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

ⁱⁱ William C. Placher. *Mark: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v Chelsey Harmon. "Mark 12:38-44 Commentary." *Workingpreacher.org*. Retrieved November 3, 2021.