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November 8, 2009

Being Worthy of the Widow's Mite

Text: St. Mark 12:38-44

During the 1920s there was a famous evangelist by the name of Bruce Barton who made a distinctive name for himself by closely tying his evangelistic *schtick*, as it were, to his previously successful business career. Thus Barton's peculiar distinction as an evangelist lay in his attempt to make the Christian businessman the model of Christianity. It was a model he thought he saw begun in Jesus himself, and, Barton claimed, Jesus was the greatest salesman that ever lived. The reason Jesus was such a good salesman was because he understood the single deepest principle of salesmanship, namely, that by giving something you will get something in return. So by investing our belief and perhaps some time, money, and energy in Christianity we would get in return eternal life and all its joys, as well as some good returns in this life. That was a pretty good investment strategy, Barton proclaimed. Besides, he went on, nobody can doubt Jesus' success as a salesman because he, in fact, did get millions to buy his product, that is, to give their faith and money to the church. And, Barton further reasoned, Jesus had a pretty good product, so who wouldn't want to buy it?

This image of Jesus as super salesman and this image of Christianity as something that offers a jackpot for the minor investment of our credulity and a few good works are images that are held dear by many people – in fact, too dearly, and by too many people. Barton's own success shows it. He was successful not because he came up with a new perspective on Christianity, but because he embraced an old one that was already in people's minds. He encouraged them simply to act on the values they really held. They believed him, because they already believed that the

kingdom of God was up for sale.

Yet, even if these are widely held views, they are false portrayals of Christianity and of Christian faith. Augustine – and it is clear that such portrayals existed in his day, too -- pointed out the problem with them when he observed: “ We do more for you, O God, than is necessary so that you might be in our debt.” But then in an ironical vein, he went on to poke fun at such an assumption: “But which of us has anything that is not already yours? You pay debts while owing no one; you forgive debts without losing anything.” Which is simply to say, how if everything that we have is already God’s, and God gives always, even if he doesn’t have to, how could we ever put God in our debt? Which is also to say, that the very thought of putting God in our debt just doesn’t work with the concept of God, at all.

There are these problems with this sort of understanding of Christianity: instead of seeing eternal life and joy and presence as God’s free and gracious gifts given to us, unmerited by us, this approach would make the kingdom of God something up for sale to some rather low bidders. It in the end cheapens the gospel beyond recognition, and far from making the gospel truly relevant to our problems, it makes it into something to be stalked and hunted by those seeking their own advantage. It also grossly misreads what Jesus was doing, for he was not trading one set of goods for another. He was offering a free gift, and he was unrelenting in his condemnation of those who tried to charge for that gift, and of those who failed to value it for what it was.

Consider here this morning’s Gospel lesson from St. Mark about the widow who gave her last two pennies, all she had to live on. Normally we read this story as a commendation of the widow’s deep faith. She should be commended. She, unlike the Pharisees, gave all. What they gave, on the other hand, they gave out of their largesse. Truly, when one gives, one should give as the widow gave – out of deep dedication, and because she saw the cause to which she was

giving as so important that it demanded everything. She was glad to give her last two cents, because to her the worth of the Temple in Jerusalem was everything. The Pharisees, however, when they gave, even though they might have been generous, never gave of themselves. That they gave with reservation showed that they didn't, despite everything they said, really get what the Temple was about.

One *should* give as the widow gave. Yet, this story about the widow's giving her last two cents is not really about the way that she gave. Nor is it in any way about the reward she might expect for giving this way. At no time does Jesus ever say, "Great will her reward be in heaven." No payoff for her investment is mentioned, nor did she seem to expect one. She just gave because it was important to her. As far as we know, she may well have returned home only to be evicted by a well-to-do Pharisee because she couldn't pay the rent.

So even though we would do well to admire the widow, the story isn't really about her. What then is it about? Well, imagine the situation which is pretty thoroughly described by Mark. Jesus is sitting out in front of the Temple with his disciples, perhaps resting his head in his hand, and carefully watching the passing scene in front of him and commenting on it to the disciples. What draws his attention, and ultimately his anger, are the Pharisees who ostentatiously parade around the grounds of the Temple. He watches them in their long flowing robes, and observes how people bow and scrape whenever they encounter a Pharisee. He observes how they solemnly march to the front rows of the Temple (no Presbyterians, they!) and make long pious prayers for everybody to admire. What then is his reaction to all that he has observed? It is out and out disgust; disgust not only for the Pharisees but for the institutions that had grown up around Temple worship, institutions that in the end did not serve God, but only human vanity.

It is in this context that Jesus then observes the widow putting her two small coins into

the treasury. What he then remarks on when he observes her is not her faith, but the nearly criminal activity of the Pharisees who have made this giving to the Temple obligatory. It is criminal, because, as Jesus says, it is “swallowing the property of widows.” Or, as the psalmist complained, it is as if “they eat up my people like they eat bread.” These two coins are all that she had to live on, and one can be sure that the Pharisees aren’t going to consider this an investment they are going to pay dividends on. But what this means is that they, the ones who are in charge of the Temple, have taken the institutions around the Temple, institutions which should give life to the poor and lonely, and have made them into institutions which rob the poor of life. Meanwhile they, the religious managers, prosper very well indeed. So while I am quite sure that Jesus saw the beauty of the widow’s dedication, he is not commending her, but criticizing those who have betrayed that dedication, and the people that they should serve. The Temple has become an idol, not entirely unlike the ancient Canaanite god Molech who also demanded human sacrifice.

That is to put it pretty bluntly. But the same thing happens time and time again when institutions that should give life, demand and eat up human lives. It happens with institutions meant to serve God, as people well know, and are often only too happy to point out. It happens also with economic institutions, corporations, and financial institutions, which after excess, arrogance, and generally creating misery for folks, are found to be too big to fail, and so get transfusions of capital. They don’t fail, but they fire a lot of people and pay performance bonuses. They do not show remorse or intent to do things differently, though. This sort of reversal of means and ends also happens to educational institutions, too, when they no longer educate for wisdom, but demand sacrifices in the guise of investing in your children’s future. To paraphrase Jesus himself, it seems that we have forgotten that such institutions were made for man, and not

man for the institution.

But therein lies a challenge. How do we make institutions serve life instead of devouring it? Well, I think one way of thinking about it is to consider the widow who gave her last two cents. There are to be sure many widows and many who are taken advantage of, deceived into giving their pennies and votes to the very people and systems that are grinding them into the dust. But there are a lot of these people who would give that money anyhow, and I think the widow was one of them. So we need to understand her perspective, and use a perspective that realizes there are people who give as freely as she did. Let me illustrate.

I well remember my maternal grandfather. He was working class, and when he retired he did not exactly reap stock dividends in his old age. In fact, the company he worked for had made a mess of the investments that passed for their pension plan. Nevertheless, he always gave a decent portion of his retirement income to any cause that asked for it, including televangelists. He did so with my grandmother's blessing. They were especially fond of Billy Graham, but there were others, too. Personally, the rest of the family was unsettled by this, wishing he would keep it and be a little more discriminating with respect to those to whom he was giving the money, although there certainly were some good causes he gave to. But it didn't make any difference what we thought because he was going to give it anyhow. Why? Because there wasn't an ungenerous bone in his body, and because he saw something worthwhile in the cause. I might note he did the same thing with me, pressing a \$5 bill into my hand each time I left after visiting them. I am not sure how worthy a cause I was at the time, although for some reason he seemed to think I was.

Now, it is tragic whenever people like this are deceived into contributing to Temples that are no more than monuments to human vanity and greed at best, or flesh eating idols at worst,

and shame on those who deceive people like this. Yet, even when they are deceived such men and women retain dignity and integrity, and are no fools, for in their sincerity, whether they are deceived or not, they witness to the real value of the Temple. They witness at least to what it *could be*. Perhaps the institutions of our lives don't now demand our respect; nevertheless, people who give like this can show us in their giving what the Temple should be like. These people give because they believe these institutions are capable of giving life. If it turns out that the Temple is a sham, well, that is no shame for the person giving his last penny; he wasn't investing for personal return. It is, however, a serious indictment of all of us who made it into a sham. Their faith in what the institution should be like has caused them to give all. And that faith is something that sustains them and makes them valuable witnesses to all the rest of us.

The solution then when we encounter the Pharisees in the Temple grounds is not to despise or pull down the Temples that they have shamed. Rather, it is to seek the real value of these institutions, and to make them once more into places where all of God's people can enter into the holy of holies, into God's own presence. Our task is not destruction, it is construction. We need then to rebuild our Temples so that they might once again give life to those who enter them. We need to learn from the sincere widows what the real value of our Temples is, and in learning from them we might actually help those who are giving so much even when they have so little, instead of taking their last penny and giving nothing in return.

The point of the widow's mite, as it is called, is therefore this, and it is a point that applies to the way we should view stewardship. The point is less about how much, percentage wise that she gave, although that is important. Rather, the deeper point is in *why* she gave those last two pennies. She gave them because she believed in the Temple and she believed that it was important for human lives, hers and everybody else's. It didn't matter what the Pharisees did, for

unlike the Pharisees she wasn't making an investment in order to see what she could get out of religion. She was giving because religion was crucial to having the right kind of life at all. She was giving because she had already received the gift of life and was grateful. She wasn't trying to hedge her future bets.

That is why we ought to give, too. But what is even more important, is that we need to make of our institutions, especially the church, a place where people find life, a place where they grow and flourish and are not consumed as if we were selling a product. This needs to be a place where we give life, everyone single one of us. For that reason, we need to give not just our treasure, and not just our time, but *ourselves*. For what makes this place, a place of life is the presence of life. That includes the lives of those who come here, and it certainly includes the presence of the life of the one who gives us all life freely and as a gift. Let us then live lives worthy of the giver, and let us, in his image give life to all who enter here by giving of ourselves.