

The Might of a Mite  
Mark 12:38-44  
November 11, 2018

We are not unfamiliar with the image of Jesus sitting in the center of the disciples or other groups of people and teaching them about the Kingdom of God. In some classical artwork Jesus is often portrayed like the great philosophers of the Greek and Roman civilizations: his hand would be gesturing to those gathered around him, inviting them into the logic of his knowledge. But not often portrayed in those pieces of art are the likely stunned and confused expressions of the people sitting in that circle. The look of not following one's logic. The look of mis- or non-understanding. The look of realization that your whole world is being turned upside down.

I've seen that look before – you probably have too. It has most certainly been painted on my own face. In a previous life before parish ministry I worked in a computer store and was often met with stunned and confused looks. Stunned because they couldn't imagine that their computer would ever break and confused because the guy that sold it to them 10 years ago promised it never would. Stunned because it would take a few days to fix and confused when I shared how much it would cost. On second thought, that was probably anger.

While what is broken is much more significant than one's personal computer and photos of cute cats and while the process of "fixing it" is much more world-changing than swapping some electronics around, Jesus meets many stunned and confused faces with teaching moments about that very world around him, around his disciples, and around us.

Jesus observes the going ins and coming outs of the temple. Notices the elegant robes and long prayers flowing across those great temple stones and hears the sound of two copper coins falling into the collection plate: their muted thud barely producing an echo.

Here in Mark 12 is one of Jesus' great teaching moments: when he points to what is broken, imbalanced, and unjust in the world, and turns our expectations upside down. In the four Gospels combined, the verb "to teach" and its variants is used around 50 times. There's nothing extraordinary about the fact that "teaching" moments occur that many times. What is interesting, though, is that in each of

the Gospels the “teaching” instances are clustered together in the course of just 3 or 4 chapters of the book, mostly in the middle of the story. Moreover, in almost every instance, Jesus is the subject of the verb: Jesus is the one teaching.

That means, then, for each Gospel author, the middle, the meat, the rising action of the story about the life of Jesus Christ is about his teaching, and our learning. In the beginning we come to know him, his mission, and his journey. In the middle we hear what he has to say. At the end we see the fulfillment of the glory of God through a cross.

This morning, Mark chapter 12 is no different. The story picks up in the middle of a teaching moment. Just before this scene Jesus is talking with a scribe about the greatest of the commandments and he teaches about love. Following that conversation and where we pick up today comes an observation of and stern warning about the scribes. Then Jesus sits down and watch the people go about their day. He watches them come into the synagogue. He observes them doing the stuff of their lives, their world.

Some rich people come through and presumably deposited large sums into the treasury, their gift echoing not so quietly. Then a widow came. It’s easy to spot a widow – she was walking alone. No man, no husband, no honor would have been escorting her. You wouldn’t even need to know her story to know she was poor. Widows were always poor. Still, into the treasury and into the soundscape, the dull thud of two cheap coins.

Jesus calls to his disciples and says, “Do you see what has just happened? She has contributed mightily, more than everyone else.” Now many of us have already figured the basis upon which Jesus makes this observation: her contribution was mighty because she had given at a higher percentage. But I’m not sure that a lecture on generous giving is the main point of this narrative.

Jesus is not just teaching about the percentages of giving, though of course he does. Not just subverting our sense of social norms, though of course he does. Not just helping us evaluate our financial commitments, though of course he is – Jesus is showing us the value of teaching moments. Those moments in which Christ and God show us how Kingdom works: both this and the one to come.

It's about how we are beckoned to listen – to let the words of Jesus, the Word and words of God, give shape to our observation of and our living in the world around us. We are taught what being a disciple looks and feels like and sometimes that means considering that we are called to be more like the widow in our living...not just our giving.

Because that is what Jesus watched that day in the temple: how people gave. We lose an important adverb in the English. The Greek says he was watching how people gave. He watched how the people put their coins into the treasury. How they gave. In what way they gave. Their expressions, their countenance.

The widow gave mightily because she gave everything she had, everything she had to live on – especially to a religio-cultural system which would likely continue to oppress her at worst and ignore her at best. This teaching moment is a stark foreshadowing of another who gives their whole life. In Mark 15:37 Jesus have a loud cry and breathed his last. This foolish and extravagant and mighty giving of life on a cross is how God gives.

In God's greatest gift of love the world has ever seen, we are set free from the world pulls us away from the Kingdom. We are set free from the giving of percentages. We are set free from fear that we won't have enough. We are taught how to give freely and generous even if the echo doesn't seem to reverberate very much. Jesus calls the disciples over to where he was sitting and shows them how to give. The disciples and we are drawn to the cross and we are taught, we are shown, how God gives.

Again, Karoline Lewis from Luther Seminary, "The widow's might is great indeed. A might greater than power. A might greater than the grandest buildings. A might greater than the most splendid displays that are mostly privilege and entitlement in disguise. Because the widow's might is God's might. A might known in love and loyalty. In giving and grace. In dependence and dedication."

The widow in the synagogue, the widow of Zarephath, they teach us not how much or how little to give. They teach us how to live. How to be completely and wholly reliant upon the only economy that matters, the only currency that doesn't crash: God's grace poured out recklessly and regularly: for you.