

Scripture Lessons *I Kings 17:8-16*
 Mark 12:38-44

Sermon *A Tale of Two Widows*

I used to enjoy reading, just for fun, the *Guinness Book of World Records* to see what weird things I would find there. Wasn't there a television show as well, I think there was. I know there was Ripley *Believe It or Not*. Anyway the *Guinness Book of Records* speaks of a woman named Hetty Green. Her nick name was the Black Widow of Wall Street because once her husband had passed, she wore nothing but black for the rest of her life. Some people just called her the witch of Wall Street unfortunately. She was known, at one point back, in the early 1900s as the most miserly person on record.

She came from a rich whaling family and when she was 30 years old her father died and left her with a million dollars, which was huge amount of money for those days. Later an aunt died and left her another million, and two years later she married a millionaire who helped her to double her fortune, and then he passed away not long after leaving her the world's richest widow at the time.

Now though Hetty Green was quite wealthy she was also, as I mentioned before, a notorious miser. Her son, in fact, she was so tight she would send her son back out into the neighborhood to resell their morning newspaper. She was known to have returned to her house to retrieve a five cent prescription bottle because she didn't want to lose the deposit on the bottle. After her death she left very few items in her house, but one of them was a small thin box filled with scraps of soap. You know when the soap gets a little bit too small.

The tragedy with of all this wealth was because Hetty feared for being poor she sort of became paranoid about being killed, robbed, or tricked out of her money. She pretended to live in poverty, living in cheap hotels and eating in dingy cafes when she would travel around the world. But the greatest tragedy of all was the affect that all of this had on Hetty's son as he got a little bit older. One day he dislocated his leg in some sort of, I think, wagon accident, and at first she was tight enough she tried to nurse the injury at home. When she couldn't do that she dressed him up in rags and took him into town to try to find a free clinic so she wouldn't have to pay for his care. And finally the leg had to be amputated because the injury had gone way too long.

The tragedy was the doctor said that this never had to happen if she had gotten him to be where he needed to be when he needed to be there. When Hetty Green died she did meet her goals for saving her money. She left an estate of over a hundred million dollars at that time. But she also left a legacy of greed and self-centeredness and suffering and misery. Hetty Green's story stands in a stark contrast to the story of another widow which we heard about in Mark's Gospel reading for today.

And that story begins when Jesus is sitting in the Temple Court, resting, praying, preaching, we are not exactly sure, but maybe just watching the crowd. But the way the story gets developed he must have been in one of the outer courts of the temple because he told the subject of the story was a woman. And the women only allowed in the outer precincts of the temple. At any rate in the outer courts there were a couple shaped boxes for voluntary coin offerings for wood and animals and incense at the temple. As Jesus sat across from one of those boxes he could barely hear the stream of people tossing coins in the containers because each made a clanging sound he was familiar with, maybe each a little louder than the next. No doubt many people threw their coins in the box with the express purpose of getting that sound out of it, in the process as well. It wasn't the clanging sound that caught Jesus' ear that day but instead it was two small noises that caught his ear. And when he heard the sound, he spotted a poor frail widow who quietly but unashamedly dropped two thin copper coins into the box. The coins were called by their Greek name lepta, which means the thin one, very small, very light, worth one-half cent in our money, and the sound they made was very small and very difficult to hear. And yet, these two coins impressed Jesus more than the clanging of millions of other larger coins. And upon hearing these noises, Jesus felt

moved to gather his disciples around himself because there was a lesson to be learned from the incident. When Jesus gathered them together, he said these words, which are familiar to us, “Truly I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing into the treasury, for they have all contributed out of their abundance but she gave out of her poverty, she has put in everything she has even her whole living.

I just want to pause here and ask a question. Why in the world, did you think, Jesus pointed out this small woman out of all the people to the disciples rather than some person who had contributed far more into the temple treasury. I think it was because the widow, of all who had passed by that day, was the best example that Jesus could find for someone who gives us an example of what it means a true Christian disciple. How can a small elderly woman teach us anything about discipleship in God’s kingdom? Well, when we look at her great action that day in the temple court as Jesus did that day, it is clear to us, that her actions are an object lesson for us about what it means to be a true disciple of Jesus.

First of all, the woman’s action tells us that being a disciple is going to cost us something. Many of you have heard of the man Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was was a churchman during the Second World War. He wrote a book called *The Cost of Discipleship*, and his writing turned out to be more than just his reflection of that cost. Dietrich Bonhoeffer cost was his very life. As a result of his brave Christian witness in Nazi Germany during that Second World War, he spent many years in a concentration camp and was finally killed for his faith. His faith cost him a great deal as we know. The widow’s actions in the Temple Court perhaps cost her less but those small coins were all she had to give away. And those coins meant for her perhaps starvation and poverty.

Many would call such generosity on the part of that woman crazy and our natural human tendency is to hold back our time and our possessions until we have enough to secure our own future. I guess a question arises in the midst of a story like this, is how much is enough to hold back. I have often struggled with this in my own life as a Christian person. I have sort of come to conclusion at least in my own psychology the more that I have the more I think I need in life. I have lived comfortably on a lot less proportionally than what I have right now. Yesterday’s luxuries sometimes become tomorrow’s necessities.

The more I have available to me and so sometimes when I live in abundance I don’t always understand what it means to be that sacrificial giver of all that I have as the widow did. With this mentality then things can twitch around and we begin instead of giving out of our plenty we give out of our want. Jesus saw that in the widow that day. True giving then as Jesus described in the widow that day means sacrifice on our part. We are called to give out of our poverty not the leftovers of our surplus.

Now secondly, the woman’s action tells us that being a true disciple means placing loyalty to God above all other loyalties in life. Hetty Green’s chief love in life was money and you could bring it back to her. She put herself first in everything that she did, and as a result, she put her child through a hellish life and her son’s life in great danger.

Life has a different focus I believe. Jesus tells us that the greatest commandment in the laws as we spoke about last week. We love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and we love our neighbors as ourselves. On this hang all the law and the prophets. The love of God and neighbor is at the center of the Christian life. And the widow that day in the temple court reflected that kind of love. She was unselfish enough to put God ahead of her own need for food and shelter and clothing.

I guess another question comes to mind when we think about that, surely Jesus doesn’t mean for us to starve ourselves and neglect our family when he used the widow as an example. Did he want us to know that we are not the dispensers of the universe in what he said and only when our lives are organized with God and our neighbors first, can we live a truly human life

Third, the widow’s action tells us that true discipleship means trusting in God. Often times we hold ourselves and our possessions back out of fear we will not have enough. The widow in the Gospel lesson today had every reason to do that. After all, who else was going to take care of her in the society like someone like her in Jesus’ day? Yet she believed. She believed that God would honor her gesture and care for her need in that time of need. Of course, I am not here to promise you’ pie in the sky bye and by’ as one of my professor used to say. I can’t promise you never ending supply of food. I can’t promise

you that you will never need or want or anything, but I can promise you this. God will be with you even in time of need, if we are able to trust enough for God to do what we can, when we can.

And finally the widow's actions tell us that true discipleship means giving from the heart. Jesus didn't command us to give on the basis of the widow's action. Jesus didn't tell us, his disciples in the modern day, to force ourselves to give or to make us feel guilty because we don't give. Instead Jesus pointed out, like the widow, the true gift comes from deep within our heart. And one of the marks of the Christian person is the fact that the inward character counts as much as outward deeds. What goes on in the inside does count as much as what goes on in the outside.

So Jesus doesn't call us to give ourselves because it looks good, or because we have to give, or we feel so guilty we must. But instead, God calls us to give because we are so thankful to God for everything that God has done for us. So, out of thanksgiving to God for the love that God has showed us in God's son, Jesus, we are called today in this season of giving to return a portion out of the bounty we have received in time, talent and life itself. The question is that, as we move forward the end of this year, what response we have made, what response we will make, to God's love for us. Again, each one of us must take a lesson from the widow and decide for him or herself in the midst of prayer and depths of our hearts. Together we say AMEN.