

Complete Devotion

Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, November 11, 2018

The 25th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 27, Year B) (Mark 10:17-31)

Mark 12:38-44 As Jesus taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

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.”

One hundred years ago today, at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, combatants in Europe signed the armistice that ended World War I. Back then, it was called the Great War, “the War to end all wars.” In 1954, November 11 was renamed Veteran’s Day. It is a day to honor those who have served and come home, many of whom carry the scars and memories of battle, paying on our behalf some of the cost of our freedom.

I have always admired aspects of military service: the discipline and cultivation of strong values of service and obedience. Service members are trained to focus on the mission, and trained to give themselves in full commitment to that mission in service to their country. When they get off track of their mission, or when the mission gets corrupted, they suffer and the country suffers. But at their best, they give all of who they are to their mission, and the world is a safer, freer place.

That’s the kind of devotion to which God calls us as Christians. In fact, the language of mission is the church’s language. Not all of us are soldiers, but we are called to be focused followers of Jesus, fully committed to the mission of Jesus, willing to give all of our living efforts until we have given the last full measure of devotion to God.

Jesus points toward this full and complete devotion in today’s Gospel reading. Jesus watches the people in Jerusalem bring their offerings to the temple treasury. He watches many rich people make generous donations. Mark doesn’t record Jesus’ response to their generosity. Jesus doesn’t criticize their generosity, but he makes no comment. What really interests Jesus—what suddenly energizes him enough to call his disciples over for further comment, is the generosity of this poor widow who gave two small copper coins.

Mark presents this scene alongside of Jesus’ criticism of the scribes for taking the livelihood of poor widows. In other Gospel writings, we also hear Jesus criticize the religious leaders for the demands they make of others without willingness to carry the same burden. So we should not miss the call for justice—the call for generosity to the poor and mercy for the poor in their struggles.

While this call to justice is important, I believe that it is part of a larger vision Jesus has. I think that there is more going on in Jesus’ words. Indeed, Jesus doesn’t say to his disciples “see what I

mean, here is this widow giving everything and the scribes don't help her!" No, his words at this moment are less of an attack on the scribes, and more of a compliment to the widow. Keep in mind that this is not simply a call to be generous. Jesus certainly asks us to be generous, but he watched many generous rich people making donations that day.

Can't you just see Jesus sitting there, watching the people go by, dropping their donations in the treasury, one after the other? Some give little and some are very generous indeed, but Jesus simply watches them go by. Then, this poor widow walks up and gives her last coins. This is what gets Jesus on his feet! Despite all the generosity of others, this woman's gift is what gets Jesus energized!

He calls to his disciples 'hey, come on over here, I have something to say to you!' Jesus is no longer just watching, he has seen something that he really wants them to notice and pay attention to. "This poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury." He didn't say she contributed more than any of those others, but rather more than all those others.

"All of them have contributed out of their abundance," Jesus says," but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." Jesus values this small gift given out of her poverty. Out of her poverty, she has put in everything she had. That is what really resonates with Jesus.

This is the story of the "widow's mite" the name is taken from the language of the King James bible that called her gift her "mite." We often hear this as a call to be generous. And yet, Jesus didn't use the generous gifts as his teaching example to his disciples. Instead, what really gets him energized, what really resonates with Jesus, what he really wants his disciples to notice—what Jesus really wants us to notice—is the complete devotion of this woman—even in her poverty.

Being a Christian in the US has its challenges, but it is far easier here than in the first three centuries of the church, and easier than it is today in Sudan or Nigeria or Syria. We get to fit church into our lifestyle, pray when it fits our schedule, take the parts we like and ignore the rest. Our consumer mindset moves us to shop for churches like we shop for a sofa. We want something comfortable, something fashionable, something that will go well with the current colors and last at least a few years.

If we are curious about religious devotion at all, our culture makes it easy for us to put a priority on religion that serves *us* well. We're attracted to a religion that agrees with *me*, a religion that supports *my* politics or *my* social causes, a religion that doesn't challenge *my* business or *my* private life, a religion that echoes back to *me* the sentimental phrases that comfort *me*. This is an easy pattern for us to fall into, whether we are new to church, or whether we've been active for years. Even for clergy, we can fall into the habit of compartmentalizing our devotion to God out of fear or self-interest. But such a religion worships not God, but the self.

What would it look like to have the widow's devotion, the kind of devotion that energized Jesus? What would it look like if we loved the other people in the lunch room the way Jesus loves us? What if we gave thought to God's priorities in our business deals? What if we told our friends

about our lives and left in the parts where God was present and active? What if we were disciplined in prayer and focused on the mission of Jesus, loving God and loving others and sharing God's love in word and action? What if we gave all of who we are in service to God?

We may not know exactly how to live that out, but we can discover how school is a place to serve God, how work is a place to serve Jesus, how among friends and even in church, we can constantly seek to honor God first and completely with all of who we are. Does it sound exciting? Does it sound intimidating? Where would we get the energy and will to give that much of ourselves? Where would we get that kind of grace and mercy to share?

Look back at the Gospel reading. Why do you suppose Jesus is so excited about this widow's gift? You can just hear him saying to his disciples 'see that? Now THAT's what I'm talking about!' You see, Jesus wasn't in Jerusalem just to critique the scribes and Pharisees. He wasn't there just to teach from scriptures. He was there to give all of himself on the cross. The widow gave from her poverty all she had. Jesus gave from his weakness and suffering all that he had, and all that he is—his whole life, his last full measure of devotion—for us. That's what excited him about the widow. That's what he wanted his disciples to see and to imitate. Jesus gave all of himself for us—all of himself for you.

God loves you enough that he came in Jesus Christ to give all of himself for you. He gave of himself to draw you into that completely committed love. No matter what your past is, no matter your success or failure in virtue—you may not even have any commitment to Jesus yet. And yet he gave himself for you. He gave himself on the cross for you that you might have life—life eternal, and abundant life in this world. Jesus invites you into this life of complete devotion that you might share in this new life and share it with others.

This is the mission that we are on. This is the focus of our discipline and our prayers. Jesus calls us to complete devotion to him so that we might be blessed and so that the world might be blessed. We cannot achieve this of our own strength. But the love of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit in us can stir up within us a deeper faith and a fuller devotion in all parts of our lives.

God bless you as you embrace this kind of devotion and see what blessings God has in store for you.