

24 Pentecost
November 7, 2021

Sermon by The Rev. Mal Jopling

Many churches around this time of year have what is commonly referred to as “stewardship Sunday.” During the service, either the Priest or a lay person gets up and reports on the financial condition of the church and on the financial needs for the coming year. Budgets are presented, and pledge cards are passed out. And often, today’s Gospel reading about a poor widow giving her last two coins is used as the text to support the appeal for financial stewardship. Well, relax—you can take your hand off your wallet. This is not going to be a sermon about tithing. There will be no pledge cards passed out this morning. I believe the Gospel story today is more about “trusting” than it is about “tithing.”

On all the currency and all the coins printed or minted in the United States are inscribed these words, “In God We Trust.” “In God We Trust” is the official motto of the United States. So, what do those four little words mean to you and to me as Christians today? Perhaps a widow with two small copper coins can teach us something about what it means to trust in God.

Jesus is in the temple. He has just finished preaching and he sits back and watches what people are putting into the offering plate. More than watching, Jesus is listening to what the people are putting in. Instead of offering plates, people would walk up to a line of trumpet-shaped receptacles. Into these they would drop their coins. Large, heavy coins would clank and make a lot of noise while small coins would hardly be audible at all. Jesus could tell just by listening who the really big contributors were.

So, behind all the rich folks dressed in their fancy robes and loud clanking coins walks a woman. We are not told very much about her. We don’t even know her name. We only know she is a widow, who has no one to protect her and that she was poor—she was literally down to her last two nickels to rub together. Her coins are so small they barely make a sound as she drops them into the receptacle. Jesus watches the woman and hears the barely audible “clink” as her two coins hit the bottom. He calls the disciples over and says, “See that woman going there. She has put in more than all those who were ahead of her.”

The disciples must have thought, “Jesus, were you not listening? That woman only put in two really small coins, so small they hardly made a sound; certainly they were too small to make any real difference. Jesus you are going to need to understand a whole lot more about money before we put you in charge of the stewardship campaign this year!”

But Jesus knows these are not just any coins. These are the woman’s last two coins. “For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put everything she had, all that she had to live on.” Another translation says she “has put everything she had, her whole living.”

Jesus is telling us the two coins the woman gave that day was not just money. The coins represent everything she possessed. The widow placed her “life” into the temple treasury that day. The story is not about tithing—the widow did not give 10%—she gave her all. This is a story about trusting, not tithing. This is a story that teaches us more about faith than it does about finances.

While it may not be a story about finances, it is a story about stewardship. Because everything we have, everything from our wealth to our health—from our talents to our time—everything we possess is on loan to us—everything is a gift to us from God. And it is our responsibility as Christian disciples to be good stewards—

to care for and nurture and to share with others all those gifts that have been so graciously given to us. Stewardship is about letting go—letting go of all that we think we possess, all that we think is ours, and offer it all to God. That is what the widow did. She was practicing radical stewardship.

I suppose it is human nature to want to hold on to what we consider our personal possessions. It's just common sense as well as good business sense to want to protect our assets. But, of course our assets are more than our tangible possessions or what we have in our bank account. Our possessions also consist of all those intangible things we think of solely as our own. Surely, things like my time or my talents—those things belong to me.

Cannot I keep just a little of “me” for myself? The story of the poor widow says no. Radical stewardship means we hold nothing back. Radical stewardship is about letting go and trusting God.

Who do we more resemble, the rich people or the poor widow? After all, the rich folks were not bad people. Some of them no doubt gave a great deal of money to the temple that day. They were charitable and well-intentioned. But what they gave cost them virtually nothing. There was plenty more where that came from. What they gave was optional. The widow on the other hand, gave her all. What the widow gave was not optional. It was not discretionary. It was everything. It was radical stewardship.

It would appear that the woman's action was a foolish act. She literally risked everything. And we don't know how her life turned out. We don't know if her story had a happy ending or not because we never hear of her again. There is no indication that Jesus came over to her, put his arm around her and said, “Well done my good and faithful servant.” I would like to imagine that one of the disciples gave her some money to buy food and that she became a faithful follower of Jesus. But we simply don't know. Perhaps she remained right as we found her—a poor widow. We learn from this poor woman, not because of what happened to her. We can learn and we can model our lives because of her magnificent example of trust and faith.

A nameless widow entered the temple that day facing a frightening and uncertain future. Facing that future, she placed all her trust in God.....

She held nothing back. There is a powerful lesson to be learned from a widow and two small coins. Like her, we have no clear idea what lies ahead, and like her our futures can seem awfully frightening and uncertain.

The woman knew what we need to continue to learn and to practice and that is everything belongs to God already. We cannot really “give” God anything. What we can do is trust God in everything. Trusting God and having faith in God is not a onetime, one decision event. Radical stewardship is a way of being, a way of living each and every day in the midst of all the uncertainties and trials of life.

Like the widow, may we hold nothing back. With the widow, let our lives boldly proclaim, “In God indeed we do trust.”

Amen.