

“A Poor Widow”

Rev. Debra Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia
November 8, 2015 Ordinary 32B

Psalm 127

Mark 12:38-44

It's good to be back worshipping with you, and in my native language again. But Tom and I had a great time exploring Japan. It's a deeply spiritual and beautiful country full of ancient shrines and temples. Christians are less than 1% of the population, but they add to the sense of spirituality there. We worshiped in two different churches, one in Kyoto, and one in Nagoya. Both church buildings were simple and beautiful, and the people were kind. And both churches had an apartment in the building for guests. They must be used to welcoming missionaries and other visitors, as they seemed to be experts in hospitality. We were grateful for their generous welcome to us, even though we were strangers to them.

We also met Motoko and Junta Tani. Fourteen years ago we baptized Junta, his sister Hikari and father Akihiro in this church. So our first day in Japan, Motoko and Junta met us and helped orient us to Tokyo. They also gave us a tour of Junta's Christian College, which educates thousands of people from kindergarten through graduate school. Most of the students are not Christian, but at this school they receive a liberal education and exposure to Christian thought and practice. The time passed quickly, but we were able to see a lot in our two weeks away. Thank you for allowing me the time to go.

The story Diane read from Mark this morning took place in the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple was a gigantic and awesome structure, with pure gold on the altars, costly ornaments. It was the center of the Jewish worship and their world, busy with visitors, incense and prayers. Jesus sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering boxes.

When we give money in church today, it's not obvious how much anyone is giving. We pass a plate to people who pay by check or put some money in an envelope. Some people even have their banks send a check to the church during the week. So few people know how much other people are giving here. But in Jesus' day, there were no little envelopes or checks. People brought coins to the temple, and anyone could tell, you didn't even have to look, you could hear how much was going into the money box. Jesus watched (and heard) the rich people putting in large sums of money. But the person Jesus noticed was a poor widow who only put in two little coins. That would translate into a couple dollars today, and it was all she had. Jesus pointed this woman out to the disciples, and told them she had put in more than any of the rich people. They gave out of their abundance and had plenty left over. But she put in everything she had, her whole living.

Now when we read this story, most of us think it's about extreme generosity. Jesus praised the widow for giving all she had. And humble generosity is part of it. But Jesus was also comparing her to the religious leaders who were taking advantage of poor people like her. A few days earlier Jesus had paraded into Jerusalem and entered the Temple, overturning the tables of the money changers, and accusing the religious leaders of turning it into a “den of robbers.” (11:15-19). And in the passage Diane read today, Jesus accused these same religious leaders of walking around in long robes (to show off

how rich they were), and for praying long prayers just for the sake of appearance. And he accused them of taking advantage of widows and devouring their houses. It's not clear what "devouring houses" was supposed to mean, whether they actually took houses away from people who were vulnerable, or just drained them of what little they had. In any case, they were not looking out for the needs of the poor as they were supposed to. Instead, they exploited them.

Right after Jesus called attention to the poor widow, he came out of the temple and said to his disciples, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." (13:1-2). This was an attack on the religious establishment of Jerusalem. The poor widow was an example of why God's kingdom must come. The holiest place on earth, the place which was supposed to be the source of righteousness and compassion, was so corrupt that it all needed to be thrown down.

Still, in the midst of this corruption, we have an example of humble generosity. It's not that Jesus wanted poor people to give everything they owned to the Temple. Jesus did not tell his disciples to go and do likewise. He pointed the widow out as an example of humility and faith in contrast to the pride and greed of the religious leaders. If you are a person who has to worry about having enough money for food, or to pay for medications, or bring your children to the doctor, the message is not to give everything you have. Rather, the message is even the little you can give is meaningful. God sees and honors whatever we can give with humility and faith.

In Old Testament times, the poor were not required to give anything. Only the people who made a good living were expected to give a tithe, or ten percent of what they had, to support the activities of the temple. And there were additional opportunities and expectations to give, including support for widows and others in need.

Today we pay taxes, and hopefully some of that money goes to support people in need. But we also give to God's work in and through the church. Some churches require their members to give a full 10%. In some Korean churches, the more wealthy members and leaders give even more, up to 20% of their income. In this church we don't look at people's tax returns, and we don't have rules for giving. We are grateful for whatever people give us. Some of you are able to give a tithe, and you do. And for that I say God bless you! Thank you! But even if you can only give a dollar, what you give makes a difference. According to the story of the poor widow, it's not a question of how much we give, but what that amount represents. The scribes gave to show off their wealth, and they still had more than enough to live on. But Jesus noticed the one who only gave two small coins, because it was the best she could do. She gave with faith and love. That's what matters.

Last summer we received a huge gift from a former member who died and left money to our church in her will. It amounted to over \$500,000. It was an unexpected and generous gift for which we are deeply thankful. We put it in our endowment fund to use for special projects. And we will give at least 2% every year to mission outside our church. Recently I heard someone say she thought that now that the church had so much money, she didn't need to give any of hers. But that's missing the point of stewardship. It's not just a question of what the church needs. The point is to be part of God's work in the world. Our gifts are important, not because they pay the bills, or get some work done, but as an expression of faithfulness and love.

The thing that makes a church great is not a few great people who carry the responsibility for everyone. It's ordinary people doing their best, giving their best. Of course God uses great minds, great talent and great wealth. But God needs all of us to give our time, our talents, our resources. It's a sign of our commitment to this community and to what God can do in and through us.

Jack read this morning from Psalm 127, "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain..." When some people build a house, it's all for show. They spend energy and money to boost their status in the eyes of their neighbors, and get all they can for themselves. But what is the point of a house? If God is guiding our actions, we will probably care about building a house where our children can feel safe, a place where we can provide hospitality to others, and a place where we can rest and retreat in God's presence. Whether it's a funky half-renovated apartment, or a spacious suburban home, doesn't matter to God. What matters is whether we are creating something that reflects God, a life-giving space that frees us up to care for each other and do God's will.

The same goes for a church building. It's not a place to show off. It's a place to gather together to worship God, a place where all kinds of people are welcomed with hospitality, a place where people can grow in faith and love, and prepare themselves to go out into the world with God's justice, mercy and love. The same people who care about this building also sing in the choir, serve as elders and deacons, feed the hungry, volunteer at homeless shelters, and help their neighbors, including day laborers in Palisades Park. It's not about status or growing in wealth. It's about honoring God, paying attention to people in need and serving our neighbors.

Next week is pledge Sunday, when we will receive financial commitments from our members and friends for the coming year. Please consider prayerfully what you can give to God's work through this church. May we grow in generosity and love in Jesus' name. Amen.