

Today's Gospel reading seems like a story about money. But it's also a story about love.

Because, in the scene immediately before Jesus sits down to observe the temple treasury, a scribe comes and asks him, "Which commandment is the greatest of them all?" And Jesus famously replies, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. And love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>1</sup>

So, when they see the scribes and widows giving their offerings, the disciples—and we, as Gospel readers today—have questions about loving God and loving their neighbor and loving themselves in the back of their minds.

The scribes that Jesus then goes on to warn people about . . . they may love God. They work around God's temple, after all, and are experts in God's texts and law. But here, they're looking not so much to love others as to *be loved* by others. These god-fearing folks walk around in long robes so they can be greeted with respect, even while they go on devouring widows' houses. They get the best seats and sit in places of honor and pray long prayers, not for the sake of God or neighbor but for the sake of themselves and their appearances.

The widow, on the other hand, she knows what people think of her. She likely goes about life unloved. She has no beloved—no husband. She experiences no love from a family—has no children to care for her. She goes about the marketplaces overlooked, ignored, disregarded. What "love" people might show her is likely dictated by religious laws that make her more the object of charity than of compassion.

But, while people may not love her, we know that God loves her. The Bible—her Bible—our Bible—tells us so. Because God commands, "You shall not abuse any widow"<sup>2</sup> and God requires that farmers leave a portion of their crops in the field each harvest, so that widows can come in and glean and eat.<sup>3</sup> God, the psalm reminds us, "upholds the widow."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrase

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 22

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 24

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 146

God loves widows, so God must love this widow. And Jesus' sort of laser focus on her and her two coins amidst a crowd betrays a great love. God loves this widow.

And while the story doesn't say so, I imagine that this widow loves God. For why else would this poor widow give all her money to a religious system that had not helped her? Why else would she put in all that she had to live on to a temple that offered countless ritual sacrifices on her behalf, but never helped her out of her poverty?

I also imagine that this widow loved her neighbor. For why else would she share with the community her whole life despite the fact that the community had hardly shared with her?

Yes, I imagine, she must have loved God, and she must have loved her neighbor. Which means, despite how the rest of the world treated and viewed her, I believe she must have loved herself.

Because people who act as boldly as she did, folks who give as lavishly and generously as she gave, they don't tend to be fearful people. They don't tend to be insecure people. Unlike the widow who Elijah meets at Zarephath, who needs a reminder to be not afraid, this widow betrays no sense of fear. Unlike the insecure scribes who go to great lengths to get people to like them, she expects no one to pay her or her offering any notice. Perhaps confident, maybe self-assured, I believe this widow loves herself, loves her neighbor, and loves God, and so she gives her pennies and herself away.

In this story, we see two people give away money. But this is also a story about two people loving: loving God, loving neighbor, and loving self. The scribe may love God—we can give that to him. And he clearly loves himself. But we're not so sure he loves anyone else. On the other hand, the widow shows us how much she loves God, the community around her, and herself—with just two coins.

As we gather here in church around the Gospel, we want to be like this widow who loves God, others, and self. But given the choice, we *tend* to choose to live like the scribe. We'd rather be greeted in the marketplaces by our friends and go to parties with our families and attend banquets at the church than live alone, poor, and without a companion. We'd rather wear comfortable robes

we buy ourselves than depend on the charity of others. And we'd rather give *expendable* income to the church than commit our whole lives and all that we have to live on to God.

We tend to act like the scribe even when we want to be like the widow, because we forget that this isn't really a story about money; it's a teaching about love.

Jesus uses these two people to show us who we are. We tend to act like the scribe. But then, Jesus shows us how we can be the kind of person Jesus would have us be: one who loves God and loves her neighbor and loves herself so much as to give her whole life away, and go forward empty handed. That kind of life makes *so much less* emphasis on money and puts *so much more* emphasis on love.

This week, we get to sit with Jesus, observing with him as he watches people use money and love. But next week, we're the ones up at the treasury. Next Sunday after worship is our annual congregational meeting, at which we will consider how we plan to spend our collective money in 2019 and consider how much we are willing to give towards that spending plan.

And like this story, our budget and our stewardship are not only matters about money. They are also matters of love. Because our budget and stewardship are also reflections of how we love God and how we love our neighbor and how we love ourselves.

So, next week, who will we be? Will we be like the scribes, loved by God, yes, but concerned with robes and seats and long prayers? Will we be like the scribes, whose striving covers up a deeper longing, a hidden insecurity about loving God and loving ourselves? Or will we be like the widow and like Christ: obviously loved by God, and also loving God mightily. Loving the neighbor we hardly know. And loving God and neighbor and ourselves so as to give ourselves and our money away.

Money is a tool of the world. There's no way to get around that. But in the church, we get to transform that worldly tool into a means of God's love. Money for missions transforms love for our neighbor into practical action.

Funds for fellowship enable us to share God's hospitality with every person who walks through the door. Money we set aside for our employees helps us show love to the people who give everything they have to serve this place.

Spending plans, treasuries, large sums, and pennies always present more than just financial questions. They present questions about love . . . questions that ask if we're willing to be unafraid, if we're willing to share our money with people we have never even met, and if, as a congregation, we love ourselves enough so as to give our individual selves away . . . to give our personal money away . . . to live not on robes or banquets or pennies, but to live on God.

Will we be like the scribes? Or dare we be like the widow? *Dare we love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. And love our neighbor and love ourselves?*

AMEN.