

“Saved and Spent”
Text: Mark 12: 38-44
Preached November 12, 2006
Rev. Benjamin Broadbent

Morning Scripture:

The scripture this morning is from Mark 12:38-44. You can follow along in your pew Bibles, page 49.

“As he 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 treasurer 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 were 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.”

Rev. Broadbent:

The hardest sermons to write are the ones where you think you know what you are going to say, and then you actually read the text. And you realize that it’s speaking to you in a way that you would not have come up with on your own.

That happened with me with this text, this week. This was a hard sermon to come up with. If you have seen me walking around my neighborhood, which some of you have, because you live in my neighborhood, you notice that I do a lot of walking, sometimes just with wiener dog, sometimes with 15-month old and wiener dog. Sometimes all by myself, but that’s my sermon writing technique, actually. The pretentious way to put it is that it’s peripatetic. This means you walk around; you wander around. It was the way that Socrates taught. He would wander around the marketplace and engage people in conversations and ask them questions. I’m just trying to keep from being pathetic. I’m trying to say something that might be of value to First Congregational Church on this day in which we’re celebrating.

It was also hard because this Stewardship Campaign for the Stewardship Committee was wonderfully hard. Now why? Because we understood ourselves to be about making a cultural shift in our church. Not totally pulling out from under everybody everything they had known, but making a shift, namely

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shifting away from becoming fixated on a number. “Here’s our budget. That’s what your pledging to is this number.” But rather to say, “The number is really only secondary.”

What we want to encourage people to do is together, out of gratitude to God’s love, out of gratitude that there is a community such as this. Out of gratitude for the care that we have received from this place. That you would simply respond out of a sense of abundance and giving and gratitude.

Well, we knew that in order to affect a cultural change within our beloved congregation, we first need to affect a culture change within our small committee. And in order to do that, we have to affect a culture change within our own hearts. And so we had these long talks, sometimes, about, you know, what is it we’re actually doing? How do we say this in a way that can be inspiring, that people can feel really good about?

Some of those conversations felt kind of chaotic, and we’re not quite sure where they’re going. And then we would have these kind of wonderful breakthroughs or realizations, and we would say, “Ah, yes.” And that’s the beauty of community, when you can come to those realizations together.

One of my thoughts in one of those meetings was, “What if we don’t receive in pledges even what we received last year?” Do you see what I was doing? I was fixating on another number. I was forgetting what the scriptural theme for our pledge drive has been, and that is, that “For mortals, it’s impossible, but for God, all things are possible.” All things. And we don’t get to decide what that looks like. If we’re really going to trust that, we don’t get to decide that it looks like a certain number. Or what we then put ourselves in the position of trusting is that God will provide, and God will make a way, and it really doesn’t have to do with dollars and cents. That’s a big shift. That’s a big shift.

Money, in our culture, as in Jesus’ culture, has a lot of weight to it and a lot of emotion. It both presents the opportunity for a possibility, but it also gets – it’s kind of the muck that sometimes gets caught in the gears of our lives. It sometimes drags us down and keeps us from being able to move forward. It sometimes – it always participates in our social relationships. That was the case in the life of the temple in Jesus’ time.

Now Jesus is, in this text, getting himself into a lot of hot water. He is not staying safe. Talking about making a risky witness. He is right in the middle of that. And there he is, in the temple place; and he is observing the treasury, a place where those who are practicing Jews, who are part of the religious society would bring their gifts. And you can imagine, I mean, he’s sitting on the floor, leaning against the stone column or sitting on a wood bench or just standing there with his disciples. And he’s just watching, because they’re

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people watchers. That's what they're doing. They're people watching in the temple.

And first he comments on the Scribes. And I say this humbly, "Look at them in their long gowns. And they want the place of prestige in the temple, the best places, and to be treated with respect." He says, "They're actually the ones that devour all that the widows have," because their regard for the widows was, "Well, you know, if you still want to be a part of this, you still gotta pay. You still gotta pay." And widows' houses, which they had inherited from their husbands, they would eventually need to sell, because they still needed to pay to be a part of the religious society.

Then he notices that there are some rich people there who are bringing these large sums. You know, I think of the cartoon where you have this stack of coins, and they're bringing those. And he doesn't really comment on that until he notices the poor widow, whom probably no one else notices. She's a nobody. A nameless, a faceless person in that society. Not of much importance to anyone. And she comes, and she puts in two copper coins. It says that both of them together are worth about a penny. And Jesus points out that that's all she has to live on.

Well, I know that a lot of you have heard sermons on this before, and you know, of course, that what we're supposed to do is we're supposed to idealize the intention behind this poor woman's offering. That she gave out of all she had, unlike the rich people who only gave a portion. It really didn't affect them very much.

And there is certainly a truth in that sermon. But Jesus is also critiquing, criticizing, pointing out the injustice in the system, which requires this widow to give everything she has, but didn't require others to do that. It required others to simply give a proportion of what they had. Contributing to this woman's poverty.

And so his comment is not even so much a praise of the woman, rather than a condemnation of the Scribes and of the rich people who like to feel good about themselves. We ascribe so much worth to money. So much emotional weight is attached to money. Take a moment and think for yourself. What's been a way in which someone else has used money, either by giving it to you or withholding money to hurt you? How have you done the same?

I was thinking about an example for myself. When I was in the seminary, I had a very fateful relationship with a woman who actually moved all the way from California to live with me in Cambridge. Awful. Thank God we broke up. And we've since made up, as friends. But I remember, when we broke up, money became the thing that continued to tie us together. Those of you who have

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broken up, none of you know anything about that, right? Those of you who have divorced, you know that the power and the strength that money can have for years and years to hold you together.

I remember my father came out to visit me to give me some comfort. And he said, "Now, how much do you owe her?" I said, "Well, she says it's like \$350." And he said, "Is it worth \$350 to you to be free?" "Oh, yeah." But you see, until that moment, I wanted to hang onto it. "No, I don't owe you that much. No." And I wanted to count pennies and all that.

Now if you don't believe me yet that money has an emotional tie [doing something on stage with a dollar bill]. I know some of you are, "Why is he doing that? That could be put in the offering plate." The voice of a grandmother or of a mother or somebody telling you you need to save every single one of these is now ringing in your head. "He just wasted that?" I struggled over whether to do this. I actually thought like, "Is that illegal?"

[someone from the audience] It's a felony.

It's a felony. The next Colorado Springs scandal. Right.

My point is this, that money has weight. It has power in our lives, and it always and only has the power that we ascribe to it. That we ascribe to it. This makes me think about the word "sacrifice," because so often when we think about money and when we think about giving, especially giving to something that we care about that's a gift. If we're not receiving any kind of product back, we think in terms of sacrifice.

Well, this has, I think, a very positive and a very potentially negative connotation. The very positive connotation of sacrifice is a holy offering given out of thanksgiving. The potentially very negative connotation is something that you give up, because you're attached to it. So you give it up, and then there's virtue in it, because you gave up something that you didn't need to but you did.

And I think the shift, the cultural shift, if I could start to suggest what that might be, is moving from culture, our culture, a wider culture, where to give to a place like a church is to give up, and it's seen as virtuous. And it's seen as somebody making a sacrifice. To this. Something that's not really even concerned so much with numbers but rather with a quality of life. An approach to life.

What would it mean for us, as a community, to together vow, to grow in becoming more giving people. Giving – in every facet of our lives. In the way that we related to other people. In the charity that we extended to people who

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maybe have different views from us, different life situations. But also with regard to money. So that we see money not so much as this kind of weighty and symbolic heaviness, but rather the very means by which might express our gratitude for life. Becoming giving. Now, how do we go about doing this? Can we think of a model of somebody who might have lived in this way? Hmm.

You know, sometimes I tell the kids that are up here, “This time, the answer’s not Jesus.” This time it is Jesus. Jesus lived his whole life in an attitude of giving. There was nothing in Jesus’ life that he was not willing to give away. And this gives to us a new view of the cross. That the cross as sacrifice is not giving up. It’s not something that Jesus would have otherwise not wanted to have done, but it is rather an extension of his life that was just giving. Everything he had, he gave away. Through miracles and healings that he acted. Through teachings that he had. Through moments like this one with the poor widow, where the whole structure of prejudice and division came crashing down. It came crashing down as a result of his giving attitude that was his whole life.

That I think is the culture change. And it only partially has to do with money. It has also to do with how we treat one another within this community. How we treat those others in our families and our places of work. In our neighborhoods. And giving where giving is hardest to do. Letting go when it doesn’t seem to make any sense. Valuing the two pennies much more than the dollar.

Oh, we’ve been on a journey these last few weeks. The Stewardship Committee this year prayed over every household that made a pledge. We also prayed for the whole church and all of those of you who haven’t pledged to date, for whatever reason. And we just prayed that – a prayer of thanksgiving and gratitude, because everyone of those pledges symbolized the decision, a life situation, a sacrifice. And what we prayed is, “God may these names, may these pledges, be a testimony to all of us of what it means, what it could mean to live together lives of giving.” Just let it flow. Just let the giving flow. It has, here at First Congregational, and we pray that it will continue to. Thank you. Thank you.

Amen.