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Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost    October 13, 2013

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## **“The Widow’s Offering”**

*(Luke 21:1-4)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*1 Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, 2 and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. 3 And he said, "Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. 4 For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."*

## **Collect of the Day**

Almighty God, You show mercy to Your people in all their troubles. Grant us always to recognize Your goodness, give thanks for Your compassion, and praise Your holy name; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

We have heard many times this story in the Gospel of Luke. “Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering, and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. And he said, ‘Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.’”

In the previous chapter Jesus had been criticizing the Pharisees and some others who were rich and powerful, who liked to wear long robes and stand in public places, and made much of their piety and of their philanthropy and good works and impressive gifts to the temple. But Jesus isn’t much impressed, because their gifts don’t cut anywhere into the substance of their being. They could afford impressive offerings, but it wouldn’t change what’s on the menu or what kind of wine they would have with it or the house they lived in or the clothing they wore. Here, in contrast to them, is one who cannot afford to give, and yet gives everything she has.

There are times, I think, when we wish that the text were less clear, more ambiguous. There are times when it would be helpful if a text were confusing to us, or at least debatable. But this is not one of those texts. We understand this one. Mark Twain said, “It is not what I don’t understand in the Bible that troubles me. It’s what I understand perfectly well.” This is one of those texts: we get it, and that is our trouble today for a couple of reasons.

First, we are troubled whenever the topic in church turns to money. You’re thinking, “Here we go again” and you’re bracing yourselves. We don’t like to discuss

money in relationship to our church or to our faith, although we will talk about it as far as the national debt is concerned or as far as taxes are concerned. But we don't want to talk about in terms of our church or faith, because somehow, somewhere, somebody told us that religion is "spiritual" and money is "material," and that never the twain should meet – especially in church. Therefore ministers are embarrassed to speak of money; and at best devote a few minutes on one Sunday a year to little homilies on "stewardship," somehow managing never to use the words money or cash.

But the church should be talking a lot about money because Jesus was concerned about money. He talked a whole lot about money, perhaps more on that topic than any other. And therefore his church must regularly address the topic as well, even though we don't want to hear it. And the honest reason why we don't want to hear it is that we are very much attached to the material and do not wish to be persuaded to part with it either by Jesus or by a preacher.

Our text this morning demands that we talk about money. The obvious conclusion to this text is this: when the rich give out of their abundance, their surplus, their disposable income, it doesn't have much of an impact on them. But this widow gave all that she had. She gave from her non-disposable income, which is what we cannot get along without. This isn't just making do without cable TV, or without the smart phone contract, or the vacation to Disney. This woman didn't know how or from where she would get her next slice of bread!

As a college student, I ran out of money once in London. I didn't plan well at all and didn't budget. I had a couple of pounds left to my name and a ticket back to Germany in a few days where my dorm room was and more importantly the cafeteria plan. I can tell you this. I didn't give my last bit of money away in London like this widow would have. No, I bought a loaf of bread and a stick of butter and ate until I was stuffed and foolishly thinking I'd never be hungry again (at least not for that bread), fed the rest to some pigeons. Then I went to a bank and wired dad.

“Please wire money ASAP.” He was neither impressed nor amused by my resourcefulness. The point is, we may smile approvingly at the extraordinary generosity of this poor widow, but never in our lifetimes have we done anything like that – emptied our pockets, poured out our hearts and trust quite like she did.

The rich gave from their surplus, this woman from her substance, the essence of who she was, and in doing so, she gave more than all of them. Another way of looking at it is no one is too poor or too constrained to give. Those on food stamps, those on fixed incomes, those paying college tuition, those who have student loans, those on a payment plan with the orthodontist, those going through bankruptcy, those with a car that needs new tires . . . this text teaches no one is too poor or too constrained to give. We give proportionately from what we receive. You may not understand the principle behind this, but surely you can see that Jesus approves of the widow’s offering, and because of that, you and I are obliged to take it seriously.

Some of you grew up in financially modest, maybe even poor households. But you remember the absolute principle of the household was that when it came time to pay the bills – the rent or mortgage, gas, food, clothing – when it came time to pay the bills the church money was set aside first, sealed in an envelope and put in the drawer so that no one would be tempted to raid it for necessities. Your parents taught you it was God’s money, not theirs, and somehow your folks managed week after week, month after month, and year after year. They made do with less. They made do without. They were not by nature philanthropic. They didn’t have to make decisions about where they were going to spread their resources. They didn’t get their pictures in the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel for being at a black tie charitable fundraiser. But they did make it a point to set aside the first fruits of their income. And that went right back to God. They didn’t think of themselves as doing a great thing but rather as doing the right thing, and, as they understood Scripture, it was the very least that they could do. They simply had an honest relationship with money. And they weren’t openly rewarded for their

generosity. The windows of heaven didn't rain down blessing upon blessing, as is promised today by so many television evangelists in the gospel of wealth. No, their giving had a direct impact on their standard of living.

Some of your parents were tithers. The tithe is a tenth, and tithing is the old biblical principle under the Law of Moses that 10 percent of your income belongs to the Lord. It is the first tenth, and it is holy to the Lord. The principle is that 100 percent of what we have comes from God; God wants you to keep 90 percent of it and enjoy it and use it and multiply it, but 10 percent belongs to God. So, for every dollar you receive, ten cents belongs to the Lord. As all things come from God, according to the Bible, all things belong to God, but God claims only 10 percent of it, for his own work.

The principle still works today. It is not a law. No one will check on you. You are free to tithe and you are free not to. But there is one who does notice, and maybe that's another part of this text that we don't like. Jesus parked himself where he could watch who was giving what. He's nosy in that way, because he knows and once said, "For where your heart is, there your treasure will also be." That is, you can say what you want . . . that God is most important in your life, and after him comes your family and so on . . . you can say what you want and words are cheap, but does your checkbook ledger confirm that confession of your mouth? Those of us who can but don't give generously of our resources have every reason to be worried by this particular text, for if money talks, then what does it have to say about us and about our faith?

Few of us in this room are as poor as the widow. We just try to get along, and some of us tell ourselves "I will be charitable when I can afford it, when I'm rich . . . when I win the lottery or get the promotion or get the kids through college or when the house is paid off. Then I'll be generous." "When I make my pile, then I will consider giving something from it." But this text teaches that true giving doesn't come out of surplus and convenience, but out

of substance, and essence.

The widow in this text was giving away her last two mites. She was not going to be defined by her poverty, but rather by her total confidence and trust in God. Out of a sense of gratitude disproportionate to her means she gave it all to God. And remember, Jesus approved. He was impressed.

Don't you ever wonder what happened of her? Did God bless her? For her generosity did he open a window of heaven and rain down on her cold, hard cash? Did a rich man marry her and provide economic security for the rest of her days? The Bible doesn't say. She may well have suffered because of her extravagant generosity. She wasn't just feeling poor. She was truly poor, and yet she gave all she had. Not 2 or 5 or 10% . . . all of it. It wasn't sensible nor prudent, but it sure impressed Jesus.

And in a few short days, he would do that too. He would give all he had, not 2 or 5 or 10%: all of it. He gave his life, his all, as a ransom for her and for the rich and for us, for our salvation. He didn't have to. At times he didn't want to. He could have held back. But in the end, for you and me he withheld nothing. It was neither sensible nor prudent, yet out of love he loosened his grip not on silver or gold but on his own life and surrendered it on the cross.

We did not earn that generosity. We did nothing to deserve that extraordinary gift. It was and is by grace alone that we live and by grace alone that we are saved. You can in no way buy the Lord's favor. The Lord's generosity is not tied to or conditioned by your giving. With your money, you cannot make him love you any more (or less) than he already does. But with your money you can thank him for his perfect love and abundant grace and eternal salvation already yours in Christ. With your money you can confess your love for him.

Tossing those two copper coins into the temple treasury this woman confessed her faith and trust in the Lord about as eloquently as it ever has been confessed. Releasing his grip on life, the Son of God eloquently confessed his love

for you and simultaneously for you, whoever you are,  
forgiveness, life, and salvation. Amen.

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