

Growing for Others

20th Sunday after Pentecost – October 17, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage

Luke 20:45 - 21:4 (NRSV)

⁴⁵In the hearing of all the people he said to the disciples, ⁴⁶“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. ⁴⁷They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; ²he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. ³He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; ⁴for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.”

We continue this four-week series entitled “Growing for Christ.” In this series, we are looking at growth – in our ministry, in our commitment, in our relationship with Christ and one another, and in our life as St. Andrew.

In this series, we’ll be looking at the opportunities and challenges that God has put before us as we consider our stewardship of all that God has entrusted to us. . . . God entrusted much to the scribes of Jesus’ day and practically nothing to the widows. What does Jesus have to do say about the stewardship of both?

Contrasts

The setting is important to appreciating today’s scripture passage. Jesus has entered Jerusalem to waving palms. He has wept over the city, knowing where things are headed. He has been to the temple, where, invoking the words and actions of Jeremiah, he has pronounced warnings against the temple, the nation, and all those who refuse to embrace Jesus and the path that he has laid before them. In response to all this, groups have come forward to trap Jesus in a mistake. The Pharisees have tried to trap him over the question of taxes. The Sadducees have tried to trap him over the question of the resurrection. Others, have tried to use David’s words against him. Now, a crowd is gathered around Jesus and his disciples as they sit in the temple courtyard. The stakes could not be higher.

Perhaps a little melodramatically, Jesus raises his voice so that everyone can hear him. He is ostensibly teaching his disciples but he wants to make sure that no one misses a thing! Jesus draws the crowd’s attention to scribes walking through the temple. How they love to walk around so that all can see their importance. How they love the best seats, the places of honor, the deferential greetings – all as they consume the property of widows. One could hardly paint a more compelling picture of the worst in human pride and greed. And all this is directed at the scribes, those the crowd sees as the learned spiritual leaders of Israel!

Scribes?

There are various groups that swirl through and around the Gospel accounts, such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, priests, scribes, and more. Who were these groups? Specifically, in today’s passage who were the scribes Jesus referred to?

In a general sense, a scribe was simply someone who could read and write. That doesn’t seem like much in our culture, but in the ancient world such people were pretty rare. In Jesus’ day, less than 10% of people were literate and many of those were barely so. Thus, we shouldn’t be surprised that scribal classes developed in ancient cultures. Scribes came to be those who were able to gain the skills and learning needed to build a career around their literacy. Basically, scribes were the educated intelligentsia and were widely respected for their learning. This would be especially true among the Jews who cherished the Word of God contained in the written Hebrew scrolls. For example, Ezra the scribe was sent by the Persian king to guide and instruct the inhabitants of Judea after the Babylonian exile. Ezra was an official in the Persian Empire and educated in the laws and customs of Israel (see Ezra 7).

The Jewish scribes in Jesus’ day were leaders in the community and were often wealthy. They were easily susceptible to the twin temptations of pride and greed. Of course, who among us is immune to these temptations? There are many warnings to the early Christian leaders as well (Acts 4:32-5:11; 20:33-35; Romans 16:18; Philippians 3:19; 1 Peter 5:2-3; 2 Peter 2:3).

Then Jesus draws the crowd's attention to the chests in which visitors could place their temple offerings.¹ The rich were stopping by to drop in their gifts and Luke is clear that these are non-obligatory contributions. But Jesus points the crowd to a woman, a poor widow,² who drops two "lepta" in one of the chests. A lepta was the smallest value coin, equivalent to about 1/128th of the average daily wage! In a pointed comment, Jesus says that the rich gave out of their "left-overs" (from J. Nolland's translation), whereas the widow dropped in all that she had. In contrast to the gifts of the rich, the widow has made hers out of a passionate and wholehearted commitment.

Growing into whom?

Everyone grows into somebody. The only question is what sort of somebody. In the temple courtyard, Jesus draws a stark contrast. On the one hand, the scribes have allowed their many talents and their successes to grab hold of their hearts, turning them inward. They live for the trappings and privileges of the elite, perhaps blind to the harm they do. Indeed, at best they have grown to be morally and spiritually blind; at worst, they have grown to be calculating exploiters of the weak.

We know nothing of the widow's life, but we do know that she has grown to have a heart that is passionately devoted to God's cause. She is destitute in a way that you and I can't imagine. There is no Social Security or Medicare. All she has is a couple of nearly worthless coins, yet she offers them to God. There is no reason to think she is a fool. She must know that her two lepta will make zero

God's Trustees

When I first began writing these studies, I came across an essay by Leonard Sweet, "Freely You Have Received, Freely Give."¹ It has stuck with me like few essays do.

Sweet's overarching point is simple: "God owns everything. You and I own nothing." We may use the word "steward," but "trustee" gets us closer to the truth. God has entrusted much to us. We may manage it well or manage it poorly, but it is still God's. The question is not how much we give to God. After all, how can we give to God what is already God's? Instead, the question is what can we do to make God's estate grow and prosper and do good. More to the point, how much do we really need to take out of the estate for our personal use? Sweet quotes Harry Wendt on this:

"When we place our so-called 'gift' on the offering plate, we are not giving God anything -- We are not giving God but what is God's own! We are merely getting our grubby little hands off what has always belonged to God. In short, we are not called to practice Christian giving, but *Christian* management and *Christian* distribution, and this applies not merely to what we 'give' on Sundays, but to our total use of life as we manage this planet to the glory of God and for the good of all."

1. Sweet's essay is still available on-line. I've linked to it at my blog: www.scottengle.blogspot.com. Simply go to the Previous Post, "A Theology of Receiving."

difference to the temple. But she knows that she gives not based upon what the temple needs, nor even what God needs, but out of her own need, her own faithful heart's need to give generously. Jesus knows that she has given far more than all the rich people lined up at the chests.

Growing for whom?

Is money really the point here? Of course not. Jesus is contrasting the hearts of the scribes and the rich with the heart of this lone widow. But Jesus also knows, as the crowd knows, that how people handle their money is a concrete expression of what they most value, where their hearts are. And there could be no more concrete demonstration of a committed, outwardly-focused heart than the widow dropping in the two nearly worthless coins.

The scribes grew to be people focused inwardly, focused upon themselves. The rich gave only token gifts, ensuring that their own social status would stay intact.³ But the widow - despite her hardships - gave no concern to herself, but gave all she had for the benefit of others. This ought to remind us that none of us have been saved solely for our own benefit. We have been restored to a right relationship with God so that we may extend God's mercy and caring to others.

¹Josephus, writer of a late first-century Jewish history, reports that there were thirteen collection chests located in the Court of the Women in the temple courtyards. Each chest was designated for a different use.

²Widows were at the bottom of the social ladder and epitomized the needy. Under the Law of Moses, the Jews were obligated to look after the needs of widows and orphans.

³In the Mediterranean cultures, the principal use for wealth was to acquire and maintain social status.

Daily Bible Readings

(more on growth toward the mature Christian life, a life lived for others)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 2 Corinthians 8:1-5 Paul commends poor congregations who have given generously to an offering that Paul has collected for the poor in Jerusalem.</p>	<p>Day 2 Hebrews 12:1-13 The value of difficult times (trials) in growing to a mature righteousness.</p>
<p>Day 3 Matthew 25:14-30 What are we doing with the gifts & talents that God has entrusted to us? Are we sitting on them or using them to grow and create more gifts?</p>	<p>Day 4 Luke 12:13-21 Jesus tells a parable about a man who has grown to be a rich fool.</p>
<p>Day 5 Acts 4:36-37; Acts 11:27-30; Romans 15:25-28; Philippians 4:10-19 Examples of generosity among the early Christians.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Mark Your Calendars – Nov 7th and 14th: Dismantling the DaVinci Code

At 9:30 in Wesley Hall on Sunday mornings Nov 7th and Nov 14th, Scott Engle will take a look at many of the claims made in Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code*. Though this is a work of fiction, many Christians have taken seriously Brown's claims of impeccable research. Was Jesus married? Was the claim of Jesus' divinity invented hundreds of years after Jesus' death? How did we get the New Testament? Who was Mary Magdalene? Do the gnostic gospels help us understand Jesus?

I have a blog! www.scottengle.blogspot.com Check it out!

I recently got intrigued with the world of internet blogs. My blog is a place where I can post some thoughts and links about living a Christian life in a complex world. I will try to post something new most days and I've set it up so you easily look over the topics of recent posts. You may also comment on them yourself. I get lots of e-mail and phone calls with questions about the Bible and theology. This blog will be a good place to participate in some of these conversations. I'll also be posting links to some of the best materials on the web related to all things Christian.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The story of the widow and her coins is often referred to as the story of the "Widow's Mite." It is very popular during annual stewardship campaigns. A person could be excused for thinking that perhaps Jesus told this brief story for the express purpose of helping pastors talk about money!

I've read countless articles and letters from pastors expressing how much they dread this time of year. Indeed, if you prowl the web for awhile you can find entire compilations of their expressed anxieties. One pastor recently wrote, "Yet it never fails: the Sundays I preach on money, someone tells me, "I've been working on a friend for a long time, and he finally came this morning when you preached on money. I'm not sure I'm going to be able to get him back, and it's your fault." For my own part I used to ask questions like, "Do you really need more money?" or "How can you possibly expect me to do more?" But this was before I came to realize that I had this all backwards. The question is not how much of our hard-earned money Patti and I will give, it is how much we will keep. The widow answered, None of it!!

- You might discuss this change in orientation. What is involved in making the change? What are its implications? Where we would begin? Where do you think such a change would lead you?

The story of the widow is not about money, it is a story of the heart. The hearts of the scribes and the rich had turned inward. But the widow's heart was consumed with her love of God and neighbor. Spend some time discussing this story. Feel free to use your imagination! What sort of person do you imagine the widow to have been?