

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

November 7/8, 2009

“What Shall I Render?”

Mark 12: 38-44

It was Tuesday of Holy Week. Jesus had made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem just two days earlier. He was institute His Supper just two days later and, of course, he would suffer and die in three. On this particular day, Jesus would make the last of his public teachings as they recorded in Mark. There were a number of people listening to him that day – Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees, scribes, his own disciples and others who followed him, those Mark calls “common people.” In the verses immediately preceding our text for today, Jesus proclaims His Messiahship, quoting David in the process. And then he warns his listeners to beware the scribes because they aren’t what they seem. They insisted on beings seated in the most prominent places in the synagogue and at the most important seats at feasts. They thought that membership had its privileges, but they repeatedly abused these privileges. They abused their power, taking homes away from widows, covering up their own sin by making public, long prayers, mostly praying to themselves. They believed that by such shows of piety, no matter how hypocritical it was, they were justified in what they did to others especially widows.

And then the Lord moves to the area of the Temple where people went by and tossed their money into the temple treasury. As he watched, he saw many wealthy people, including some scribes I’m sure, toss in lots of money. But then a widow came and tossed in just a couple of coins, not gold or silver but copper. The Bible calls these mites. Yes, the same mites that formed the basis of the mite boxes used by our LWML. These two mites were nothing when compared to what the wealthy were tossing in the treasury. They were a mere one-fortieth of a day’s wage. By today’s standards, her offering amounted to a fraction of a cent. It was hardly worth noticing and yet Jesus noticed her. He even called his disciples to himself and made an example of her. The wealthy threw in a lot of money, he said, because they could afford it. They gave out of their abundance. But this widow gave out of her poverty. She gave all she had to live on trusting, as the widow at Zarephath had done centuries before, that God would provide. In the end, Jesus said, she gave more than all those other rich people did because she gave out of faith. And he knew that through her faith, God could do great things for her.

The Lord seeks to do great things for us as well. Moved by faith, we respond to all that He has given us by returning to Him a portion of what He has first given us. We give him part of what we have because we first give Him all of who we are. Remember what St. Paul said in Romans? “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies as living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” You see, like the widow, our lives are to be our first and best offering to God, serving Him as we serve others.

Someone once said that one should “give ‘til it hurts” but the Bible tells us that we are to “give ‘til it kills us.” You see, that’s the character of self-sacrificial love, offering all that we are and have for God and others. At some point in time, we’ve all probably been asked to “give ‘til it hurts” and in the process we have shown what a low threshold of pain we really have. And if we’re not careful, what we often give, whether monetarily or otherwise, we may give with the wrong motivation. We may because we think we should rather than because we want to.

The widow’s offering serves as an example but as an example of what would soon happen. The widow gave all she had. And Jesus gave all that he had in offering his very life on the altar of the cross. The widow acted out of love for God. And Jesus acted out of love for us. The widow gave out of her poverty. And Jesus made himself poor for our sake. The widow’s gift was greater than all the gifts of the rich combined. And the Lord’s gift to us is greater than anything we can think, say, or do. The widow’s gift went to advance the Kingdom of God. And God gives us and all who believe in Jesus that very Kingdom. He does it through Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. He won that forgiveness by offering himself on Calvary for us sinners ruined by the Fall. And he forgives us when we act less than charitably. He forgives us when we do not act out of love, for he himself is love. He is love incarnate. His love is so great that he died for his bride, the Church, and he rose again so that the Church might not be a widow. He is with us. And he still comes in Word and Sacrament. He comes to announce freedom, freedom to give as He has first given us,

Remember what St. Paul said in 2 Corinthians: “But this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work. ... Now may He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food, supply and multiply the seed you have sown and increase the fruits of your righteousness, while you are enriched in everything for all liberality, which causes thanksgiving through us to God. For the administration of this service not only supplies the needs of the saints, but also is abounding through many thanksgivings to God, while, the proof of this ministry, they glorify God for the obedience of your confession to the gospel of Christ, and for your liberal sharing with them and all men, and by their prayer for you, who long for you because of the exceeding grace of God in you. Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!”

May God bless our stewardship emphasis this month as we first of all give ourselves to Him once again for Christ’s sake and then commit all that we are and have to advancing His Kingdom in this place. And may He grant that we be as faithful to Him as He is to us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.