



St. Anne's Episcopal Parish
Church Circle • Annapolis, MD • 21401

Parish Offices & Education Building
located at 199 Duke of Gloucester St.
Annapolis, MD 21401

Phone: 410-267-9333
Fax: 410-280-3181
www.stannes-annapolis.org

Amy Richter
Proper 27 B: Mark 12:38-44
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She Looks Familiar

In today's Gospel reading we hear the story often called the Widow's Mite, the great story of giving, the story of a poor widow who gave everything she had into the temple treasury.

What the rich young ruler was unable to do, the poor widow did without even being asked. For her, it was as easy as opening her hand, and letting her last two copper coins fall into the collection box in the temple treasury. The two small coins made such a tiny sound that only she could hear it.

For all she knew, no one even noticed her make her offering. For her, that was nothing new. She was one of society's little-noticed people, a widow, a poor. The only safety net in her society was how well people observed God's command to care for the widow and the orphan and the resident alien in your midst. Today, she comes into the temple to put her meager offering into the collection box. One glance tells you she is no one whose name you would know, no one you would recognize, and no one you would notice. No one recognized her anymore. No one, except Jesus.

Jesus sees her standing in the temple treasury giving up her last two little coins, worth barely a penny. Maybe it's something about how she stands there feeling the coins on the palm of her hand, warm from her skin, with such slight weight, like a handful of feathers or dust. Or maybe it's something about how she lets them go, drops them into the box, watching them fall. Something in how she offers her gift lets Jesus know she offers everything she has, so that when she gives them up and turns to leave, he knows she has nothing left. She captures Jesus' attention so much that he calls his disciples over to notice it too. "Truly I tell you," he says to them, "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."

That's why we notice her this morning, this poor widow with no name, because she gave everything of the little she had. She held nothing back, and so Jesus said she gave more than all those who gave their spare riches to God, their surplus wealth from their abundance. The poor widow has become the supreme example of generosity in giving.

But I wonder a little if we're really seeing what Jesus wants us to notice.

After all, are we really supposed to hold up as an example a poor widow who gave her last penny away, a woman who leaves the temple even poorer than when she came in? Was it right for her to give those last two copper coins, when she needed them more than any scribe or temple employee ever would? We are justifiably worried when we hear about poor elderly people sending in their social security checks to tv evangelists. What is it that Jesus is pointing out here? What does he want us to notice?

Jesus does not say that a poor widow becoming poorer is good. He just tells his disciples to notice her, and to compare her actions with all those noticeable people, the people we usually pay attention to, whose abundance catches our eye. He tells them to notice the difference between the security that comes from having wealth, and the security that comes from knowing you're entirely dependent upon God. Notice the difference between what looks like a great big sacrifice and the real thing. And in this offering of gifts back to God, this poor widow is the biggest donor of all.

He tells his disciples to notice because this is the end of Jesus' lessons in the Gospel of Mark about the kingdom of God ushered in by Jesus, a kingdom where lots of things get turned on their heads – where the last shall be first, where the one who is great must be servant of all, where by losing your life you find it, where the least likely people are the people Jesus notices first. The poor widow is his last lesson about the Kingdom of God. When he leaves the temple on this day, his public ministry is over. In four days he will be dead, having let go of his life, having made his own offering, giving everything he had, all he had to live on.

Jesus noticed the widow because it was the end for her and it was the end for him too. She gave all she had for the temple, and he was about to give his life for the world. She withheld nothing, and neither did he.

“Look,” he said to those he was trying to teach about following him, “This is what I have been talking about. Look at her.”

Jesus held nothing back. And his holding nothing back, his becoming poor and empty, means we lack nothing. He died that we might have life abundantly. The poor widow in the temple pointed forward, Christ-like, foreshadowing the complete sacrifice that Christ would make for us.

We stand on the other side of Christ’s offering. We look back and remember what he did for us, and we try to live out the difference his offering made for us. How do we respond to his ministry, his life and death for us, his pouring out of himself for us?

We respond by throwing away the scribes’ approach to life described at the beginning of the gospel reading. Because of Christ’s righteousness, we don’t need self-righteousness. We don’t need to try to earn our way into God’s heart, to get fulfillment and fullness at the expense of others. We don’t need to earn respectability through our money or status.

We respond with gladness, knowing that because of Christ’s gift, we are free to give. We are free to give ourselves and of our resources, our time and our talents, proclaiming by word and example the good news of God in Christ.

This is our annual giving stewardship time, when we have the opportunity to offer our pledges of financial giving for the work of God through St. Anne’s Church. Stewardship is the practice of celebrating all of life as a trust to be managed on God’s behalf. Stewardship is the responsible management of all the resources God has entrusted to each one of us, including our financial resources. God has entrusted to each one of us a variety of resources to use here and now for God’s work in the world. God entrusts our whole lives to us and gives us complete freedom about how we use them. There are no non-stewards. No one is exempt from being a steward, a caretaker of our own gifts and talents, money, time, opportunities, relationships, and the world we live in. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are to let our relationship with Christ shape our stewardship, inform our hearts and minds as we make decisions about what to do with everything entrusted to us. In thanksgiving for all God has done for us, we try to use our lives and possessions to God’s glory and the world’s benefit.

Especially as we get to know one another here, early on in my time as rector of St. Anne's, I want to share with you something very personal to me about my approach to stewardship. My biblical and theological beliefs are foundational to my convictions about Christian giving. Three of these convictions are especially important to me. First, I believe in Jesus Christ, and I believe that Jesus Christ has the greatest power to change the lives of people. Second, I believe in the Church. I believe the Church is the Body of Christ and has the power to change and improve and enrich people's lives. Our offerings of money sustain our place of worship and support our ministries of service and compassion, prayer and hospitality, care and working for justice and peace in the world. Financial giving enables a church to do what God calls it to do to help people and serve Christ in all people. Third, I also believe that practicing good financial stewardship helps people grow spiritually.

I have grown spiritually by practicing the tithe – the biblical standard, and Episcopal Church's standard of giving 10% of one's income – 10% to remind us of the whole – for God's work. It is important to Joe (my husband) and I to set the first 10% aside for the church as an act of thanksgiving and trust. Our lives have been blessed – we have grown spiritually through this discipline. It means something to us that the most important check we write on a regular basis is payable to the church. It means something to us because we know our gift is needed, makes a difference, and is used to do God's work. For me, ten percent is the right amount to stretch me, to remind me to trust God. And the longer I tithe the more joy and freedom I do feel about giving, the more I remember that everything I have and do and am is God's gift entrusted to me during my life, to manage on behalf of God while this life is mine, and I am so thankful I want to give whatever I can in response.

I share my experience with you not to say what you should do – that's the scribe's approach – but to share with you a practice that is life-giving to me, and to encourage you to pursue your own growth as you think and pray about your own giving – financial and other giving you do. As with any other spiritual issue, if you want to talk with me about it, please do.

My prayer for all of us is that we will all discover the joy of living and giving in the freedom won for us in Jesus Christ.

Amen.