

First Presbyterian Church
Mark 12:38-44, “Seeing and Being Seen”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 11/7/2021

We live in a very visual time.

We like to see things and to record the seeing of things
with our phones, cameras, and computers,
and then to display for others what we have seen.

One of the reasons I stopped using Facebook (and there are many)
was because of the people who would make dinner or go out to dinner
and then post pictures of their food saying,
“look at what I made!” or “look what I ordered!”

Well, I’m glad they had good food, and I’m sure some people were inspired by it,
but for me ... I don’t need to see other people’s fancy dinner.

It’s like eating fancy food is good, but “being seen” eating it
– well that’s even better.

So that’s what I mean by “being seen” on one hand,
and then on the other hand there is “seeing.”

“Seeing” as I want to use it today, is not gawking at the spectacle
or consuming images of others,
but rather careful observation of the way things work.

A person who engages in the practice of seeing would not stop at the surface level
when taking in a situation, but thinks about the power dynamics,
notices patterns of behavior, considers the emotional content,
and connects the dots between seemingly unrelated
activities.

Jesus was someone who practiced seeing,
but he didn’t care so much about being seen.

Today's passage contrasts two characters
who are both observed by Jesus while he taught
crowds of people in Jerusalem.

The story begins with Jesus and his disciples in the Jerusalem Temple courts.

He's been interacting with a group of religious leaders called
the teachers of the law – or sometimes translated as “the Scribes.”
A crowd of people seems to have gathered around to listen in
on their conversation.

After Jesus finishes his interaction with these leaders,
he looks up and sees rich people giving to the temple treasury.

The temple treasury was a square court 200 feet by 200 feet
within the temple bounds.

Inside this court there were 13 large metal containers
that were narrow at the top and wide at the bottom,
so that they were shaped like trumpets,
and in fact they were called trumpets.

Each container had an inscription on it indicating the kind of offering
that would be collected in that trumpet.

Nine were for the collection of what was legally due from worshippers,
and the other four were for voluntary contributions.

The rich people Jesus sees would have been very visible in the court,
as would the container they were placing their gifts in.

Mark says in v. 41 that “many rich people threw in large amounts.”

Jesus sees them even as they are happy to be seen.

At the same time, Jesus sees a poor widow. She puts in two small copper coins
called “lepta.” A worker in those days would be paid around 130 lepta
for a day's work. This woman gives 2 lepta.

In our day, that's like \$1.25.

Seeing all of this, Jesus offers an insight to his disciples
and anyone else who was listening in:

“This poor widow has put in more than all the others.
All these people gave out of their wealth;
but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.”

Jesus saw this saintly woman for who she truly was,
just as Jesus saw and loved all the saints of the church we have remembered
in today’s service.

Now I want to offer two interpretations of this.

The first interpretation focuses on Jesus making a comparison
between the rich people and the widow that goes like this:
The rich gave well, but the widow gave better because her offering
required more personal sacrifice.

Surely the sound of the coins deposited in the trumpets by the rich was greater
than the sound of those two lepta.

But \$1.25 could buy the widow a bit of bread, or maybe some soup.
It was all she had to live on. Even so, her love for God,
the dedication of her faith was so great that she gave
out of her poverty.

Now, Jesus’ point is not that everyone should give everything that they have.
Rather, his point is that the value of your gift isn’t measured as much
by the number of digits on the check, but by the level of impact
it has on your own approach to life.

According to this first interpretation, we collect an offering both to help
those in need and support the ministry of the church,
but also to cause the giver
to re-evaluate what matters in our lives,
to make us express with our financial decisions
the faith that we express in our worship.

From this perspective, the insight of the widow's gift
is that when we collect the offering, we're saying,
 "my life is going to need to be ordered differently
 as a result of this gift."

Is that challenging for you?

It's certainly challenging for me when thinking about my own giving.

Now we come to the second interpretation.

Remember the conversation Jesus was having
with the Scribes or Teachers of the Law
in the passage before this one?

What Jesus said to the gathered crowd was, "Watch out for the teachers of the law
with flowing robes who love to be greeted with respect in the marketplace
and have the best seats in the synagogues,
and be honored at banquets."

Clearly, Jesus is critiquing this group for their emphasis on *being seen*.

He notes a number of places they like to be seen:

 they like to be seen in the marketplace (a public setting),
 they like to be seen in the synagogues (a religious setting),
 they like to be seen at banquets (a private setting).

In other words, these Bible teachers are *always* worried about
who is seeing them do whatever it is they do, wherever it is they are.

But not only that: "*They devour widows houses
and for a show make lengthy prayers.*"

These religious leaders, according to Jesus, gobble up the homes of widows.
It's a terrifying and disturbing image.

Now Jesus didn't care about being seen, but he knew how to see.

What if Jesus was connecting the teachers of the law
who make much of themselves
to the rich who are giving out of their wealth
in the court that day?

And what if he was connecting the widows whose homes are devoured
to the widow who was giving *all that she had* that day?

If we connect Jesus' teaching in vv. 38-40 with his observation
in vv. 41-44, we arrive at a very different interpretation
of the widow and her gift.

What if the widow's gift is an object lesson used by Jesus
to further condemn a system that benefits the rich
(who give out of their wealth)
and still expects a widow who has almost nothing
to give all that she has.

In some way, these privileged people were feeding themselves
on the little bit that was available to others.

It doesn't take too much imagination to draw similar connections
in our own society today, and I'm not just talking at large,
I'm talking about inside the church.

With this interpretation, the challenge is not to give sacrificially,
but to take up an offering that genuinely benefits those who are in need,
rather than fattening those at the top at the expense
of the good-hearted giving of disadvantaged people.

This second interpretation is a challenge to our institution and our leadership,
and a call for accountability in our finances.

Here we connect more directly with the concerns of our neighbors
who have become disillusioned with corruption in institutions
like the church.

Which interpretation do you choose?

I'm here to say, I don't care. But I hope that whichever you go with, you act on it.
If the widow's offering is an example of deep sacrifice for the purposes
of God, then find the places in your life and in your budget
that you can make a deeper sacrifice.

And if the widow's offering is an example of religious exploitation of the poor for the benefit of the rich, then follow the money you give.

Look at the budget of our church as a moral document.

Does it reflect our values?

Does our expenditure on staffing and our building translate into good news for the widow of our day?

A widow today is not only a woman whose husband has died, but anyone of any gender who lacks a social support network that provides stability and safety.

So we might say instead, is our budget and giving practice good news for the migrant worker of our day?

I pray that it is, and I work with that goal in mind.

But I'm not so naïve as to think that I'm exempt from this critique.

I hope you'll find some connections between Jesus' commentary on the rich and the poor offering their money and this quote from Jeffrey Greenman in Pedagogy of Praise:

"The weekly practice of offering our money to God's service trains us in the peculiar habits of whole-life discipleship.

We learn that what we do with our money is really a matter of worship, and indicator of our allegiance to God.

In fact, one of the best barometers of our spiritual health is what we do with our money in all areas of life.

And if that is true, then what we do with our money on Sunday has tremendous significance."

We take time to give our money because doing so with integrity shapes our personal lives and our institutional life and our public witness to be more like Christ.

When it comes to our money, may God give us courage to repent from being seen, and the grace to learn how to truly see.