

Abundance Redefined
Mark 12:38-44
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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For those of you who are uncomfortable with talk of money, you might have expected that since last week was Commitment Sunday you could confidently walk into church this morning without worrying that you would hear a scripture passage addressing money or giving or anything like that. But, here, as we continue reading in the Gospel of Mark, is *another* passage about money – this one explicitly about offerings that were being given at the temple. And here we are reminded that Jesus really did talk about money a lot.

He talked about our need to share it. He talked about our dependence on it. He talked about our need to be set free from being addicted to it. Here in this passage, he is sitting by and watching as people put their offerings in the collection. Here in this passage, he is talking about money and our relationship to it. And here in this passage, he is talking about so much more than money – he is talking about the commitments of our lives and our hearts.

As we were reminded last week, these chapters in Mark – from chapter 11 to 14 tell stories of Jesus' last week of life. They are filled with important lessons. And they are filled with increasing conflict that will finally lead to his death. In these stories we hear what Mark understands to be Jesus' last lessons for his followers. So, we should sit up and take notice.

So, what's going on in today's passage?

As we've talked about before Jesus was often in conflict with the authorities, especially in these stories near the end of his life. And while the passage we heard last week was one of agreement between he and a scribe, this week we return to that conflict.

The passage begins with Jesus' criticism of the scribes. He said, "Beware...beware of those religious leaders who like to show off...beware of those who think they deserve respect just because of their position and not because of their person...beware of those who use their power to get favors for themselves but neglect those who are need...beware of those who even take advantage of the needy."

And the reality is that while it was scribes that he referenced, this is not a statement about Jewish scribes or even Jewish leaders in general, but is a statement about any leaders, particularly, but not only, religious leaders, who use their power to their own benefit and who live in ways that say that they are better than others.

After this critique, Jesus then shifts our attention. And some versions of the Bible put a new title here – something like "The Widow's Offering" or, for those of us who remember the King James Version we might recall the title, "The Widow's Mite." But, remember, those titles are additions by translators. They are not part of the Biblical text. So, we must not think of verse 41 as starting another conversation, rather, just as Martha read it this morning, it is a continuation of the same conversation. Jesus has criticized the religious leaders for their abuse of power and then, as he sits near the treasury – that is, the place where people put their offering, he notices someone who could not be more different.

She is a widow. And right there we should be alerted that in that one word we are to understand that she is *not* a person of power, that she is *not* a person of means, that she *is* a person who is dependent upon the society and systems around her for her wellbeing.

In the midst of all those bringing their offerings to the treasury, most of whom were part of the group we would call "the haves" and who were bringing larger amounts, Jesus points to a

woman who brought a small amount – according to the New Revised Standard Version, “two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.”¹ And yet, Jesus praised her gift.

Only a penny? Why would that receive praise? That gift couldn’t pay any utility bills. It couldn’t purchase curriculum for the children’s faith formation classes. It couldn’t even buy a can of food for the Food Pantry. The gift was not of much value by our worldly standards.

And yet, Jesus praised it.

And did you hear why? The New Revised Standard Version reads, “For all of them [that is the other people – the ones who were giving more] have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”²

In other words, the woman gave more. Not a larger part of the total offering that was collected that day, but she gave a larger part of herself.

And, while the New Revised Standard Version is my go-to translation for many things, this is a passage where I think the translators got it wrong. In fact, if we look at other versions we hear something different. Instead of saying the other gave out of their abundance, the Common English Bible says, “All of them are giving out of their spare change” and the New International Version says, “They all gave out of their wealth.”

See, if we only think of abundance as being about the bottom line dollar, the amount on our bank statement, the deposit made into our bank account, then that is what they gave from. They gave out of the large amount they had accumulated.

But, it seems, that in the upside-down world of a savior born in poverty, whose family was on the run as refugees in his toddler years, who never owned a home but lived on the hospitality of others, who fought with love rather than his fists, who died because of what he

¹ Mark 12:42, NRSV.

² Mark 12:44, NRSV.

believed in...in the upside-down world of this Jesus who we choose to follow, abundance is about something very different than our accumulation of money and material goods. Abundance is about something very different than worldly power and prestige and position. Abundance is about how we live, how we give, and how we trust the community with our very lives.

Yes, the rich people who came and gave their impressive offerings that ensured their name would be on the buildings and they would have the seats of honor at all the community meals, they gave more coins, more quantity. But, they gave only what was safe, only what was extra, only what didn't impact their living.

The widow, on the other hand, may not have even known when she would next hold two small copper coins. But she understood abundance to about something much larger, much more valuable. Rather than being tied to that which she could hold in her hand, she gave it up and chose to live from the place of her heart. She shared in a way that said that she trusted her God and her community so much that she would give up not only the coins, but even her control.

We often think of abundance as "having a lot" and usually in first world countries that means a lot of stuff. And we think of scarcity as having little, as being in need, as being dependent upon others. And yet, if we define it by the measure of Jesus' life, then our definitions change.

Perhaps it isn't accidental that here, just days before his own death, Jesus points to a poor woman who tossed in a measurably small offering that for her was everything and he says, "Look at this woman. In giving those few coins, she gave her everything, she gave her livelihood, she gave her life."

So, what does this mean for those of us who claim to be followers of Jesus?

Are we willing to do more than enjoy the stories of his life and treat them as the history of an impressive person?

Are we willing to do more than sit in awe of the way he lived but then let ourselves off the hook by claiming his divinity, his different-ness?

Are we willing to do more than read the stories in the sanctuary and then leave them behind when we exit the building?

If we are Jesus' followers, then what happens if we actually follow?

What would our lives look like if we lived in abundance, not the abundance of the world, but the abundance of God?

What would our lives look like if we understood ourselves not to be self-made individuals, but to be interdependent upon our creator, our communities and the rest of creation?

What would our lives look like if we shared grace in abundance and joy in abundance and peace in abundance and love in abundance?

What would our lives look like if we were set free from having to protect our stuff and our positions and our power?

What would our lives look like if we were truly grateful for the very gift of this life?

What would our lives look like if we embraced abundance redefined?

Friends, we claim to be followers of Jesus. Imagine the abundance in which we will live if we actually choose to follow.

Amen.