

Mark 12:41-13:4

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'Truly I tell you, 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.'

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?'

“The Widow’s Conspiracy”

Rev. Charles Schuster

November 14, 2010

So, next Sunday we'll bring our pledge cards to the service and it will be Commitment Sunday, and we'll want to continue to support our church, and what I'm striving to do today is to give at least one reason why we may want to do that. It is possible to know the facts and miss the point. Sometime things add up and we come to conclusions, but if we don't reach a little deeper, we're going to come to some conclusions that are wrong and make us look silly. Sometimes what appears on the surface seems to make sense until we reach below the surface and find some kind of deeper meaning.

For example, Thomas Friedman in his book *Hot, Flat and Crowded*, cites a recent study that found that the average American golfer walks about 900 miles a year. Another study found that American golfers drink, on average, 22 gallons of alcohol a year. That means, on average, American golfers get about 41 miles to the gallon. And aren't we proud. Yet, when you think about it....

There was an elderly woman who applied to be a resident in a retirement home. She visited the place and was filling out the application. The questionnaire asked about her health and style of living, and she wrote her address on the line that asked for that, but on the line after the word "zip" she wrote, "I have a surprising amount of it for my age." Now that makes you proud, because I bet she does have zip.

This morning I want to retell the story that I told last week about the widow's mite, only today I want to see if it has any zip, and how many miles to the gallon we can get on it. Today I want to reach into that story, so I'd like to invite you to think with me what's being said through the story of the poor widow's gift. Because of where it's placed, where the story sits. What comes before it, and what follows after it. Because I submit to you that there is a message in that context itself, that is as important as the story. The widow gave two coins. We know Jesus saw her do it. She gave two coins, first of all. She gave two coins, but what was happening before she gave the coins? What was Jesus doing?

What was he seeing? What had his attention, before the widow put in the coins, in the story Mark and Luke give us?

Jesus was teaching in the temple. He noticed the scribes. They walked around in their long robes. They were greeted with respect, which they demanded. They got the best seats. They prayed long prayers. Know anyone like that? Okay, now, wait a minute. It's like the man who wears the shirt that says, "I may be left-handed, but I'm always right." And the best thing you can say about somebody like that is, at least they're not a twin. In a zoo in Tennessee there's a sign, it says, "Don't lean on the fence. Don't climb over the fence. Don't get too close to the cages. Because if you do, the animals will eat you, and that will make them sick." Some of us are that way. We could make animals sick, in our effort to show our stature in our moments of privilege and pretense. When we think well of ourselves, we must not think less of others.

Eddie Robinson was a great coach at Grambling University, great school. Eddie Robinson was a coach there for years, and when he retired, they named the stadium Robinson Stadium. What a tribute to a coach whose teams won lots of games. But there is an even greater tribute to Eddie Robinson. It's written over the entrance of the stadium. It's a statement that comes directly from Eddie Robinson's methods and manner. It says, "Robinson Stadium, where everybody is somebody." The world changes every time a nobody becomes a somebody who does what everybody thought couldn't be done. And see, that happens all the time.

The scribes strutted and preened and thought they were special. When they spoke, people listened. When they told a joke, people laughed. When they entered a room, people stopped talking. Then Jesus was with them. He thought they were special. You know, he really liked the Pharisees. But he thought everybody special. And when he saw the poor widow put the coins on the table, "Look at her," he said. "Look at the rich people putting their coins on the table. She's as important as they are. Look at her. We're all important. Look at her. Look at how big her gift. Look at how much what seemed to be so little. Look at the scribes. Look at the gifts to the temple. Each giving what they can, doing what they're able.'

Colin Morris, a British Methodist, was right when he said, "Jesus invited those disciples to follow him and he took them as they were, in particular life situations, and forced upon them hard decisions. Never showed them a way out of their problems, but offered them a way through them. And never asked anything of them that he didn't ask of himself." Still true. They were not brilliant thinkers. Barely adequate, in fact. They had not great courage. Actually cowardly, at times. They could not move mountains or heal lepers, but they could inspire others who could. Just ordinary women and men who, in the end, did what he did, but did so much more, as he said they would. Inconsequential they were, but special. Inept at times, but giving what they had, seeing what they could, doing what was asked of them.

It was in the paper this week, Ariel Sharon has been moved back from a hospital to home. He had a stroke, and has been in a coma since 2006. Sharon was the defense minister in

Israel. He was the minister of agriculture. He was a hard-line settlement builder. He was an Arab-fighter. He was a hero to some and a war criminal to others. But when he became Prime Minister, something happened to him. All at once, he cared about the Palestinians, about the enemy, about peace, and the PLO and Yassir Arafat. He changed, and that got him into some trouble. Someone asked him why. He said, "I see things from here I couldn't see from there." What did he see? He saw all people are special.

We have people in our church who are high-profile, and you're looking at one of them. I run into folks from the church out in town, I know the faces, but sometimes I don't know who they are. I'm special, but so is everybody. You see, we have a great church because the people on the periphery are more important than the ones in the spotlight. Everybody is special. All that's done is important in this church. We have volunteers who come and check out books from our library and check them in for you. We have a man who does CDs and DVDs of the worship services, and gets those to the shut-ins. We have people who are trying to get us to sort out our garbage so we can compost it and recycle. We have five or six of these people who show up, and they are people of great dignity, mind you, they show up through the week several times and they go through our garbage. They're special people. We have people who fold the church newsletter and prepare it to be mailed. We have a building maintenance crew, they're volunteer. They plant flowers, they clean up the leaves, they come every week and they sit over there in their little church chairs and drink coffee and eat doughnuts and talk about the preacher the previous Sunday, is what they do.

Two Sundays ago I was having trouble with my voice and a church member just about the middle there, you saw him, went out and came back in, brought me a glass of water while I was preaching. The clergy colleagues didn't know what he was doing, they thought maybe he was coming up to attack me. They thought about warning me to run for my life. But they just sat there. He's special; not sure about them. We have people who volunteer to make coffee for us. You're going to have coffee afterwards, somebody volunteered and made that. Every now and then that happens. We have greeters who welcome us to church. We have communion servers and preparers and ushers who hand out the bulletin. We've got this character who's a graduate of Iliff School of Theology, is going to run this auction for us, for crying out loud. There will be a lot of crying out loud, I think probably that's the case. We've got choir members and bell choirs members.

The scribes were important and they knew it, and so is the poor widow. All of us are important. Fred Rogers wrote that book *You're Special*, and he tells us being perfectly human means having imperfections, but all of us strive to be perfectly loveable in the eyes of those who love us, and the most important message we get in life is about the value of being who we are. The poor widow gave her gift, the scribes listened to Jesus, and he said, "Look at her, look at her. We're all special, no one better than any other." Sometimes we make the animals sick. Sometimes we are annoying. Sometimes we strut and preen, and sometimes we think we're better than others. But we're all special, the rich and the poor, the good and those trying to be better. Jesus saw the woman with the two cents put onto the temple treasury and he said, "Look at her. Look at that. We're all special."

Secondly, what happened after Jesus saw the woman put the two cents on the temple treasury? Look at what happened next, and look at what Mark is saying, as well as Luke, in telling the story the way it's told. The disciples were impressed with the building, the temple. I don't think they got out much. But they were impressed with the buildings. "Look at those building, Jesus." And he said to them, "You know, those building are going to be destroyed. They're coming down. There won't be one stone left." Was Jesus prophetic? Did he know in advance? Well, maybe. Mark wrote that Gospel after the Romans came in and destroyed the temple, and those buildings came down, and the Romans brought them down. In a sense, evil seems to have prevailed. And Mark wants us to think about the destructive power. Have you ever thought about the forces of evil? The bombing of the World Trade Center? The plane flying into the Pentagon, the murder at Columbine, the students, the school in Bailey, Colorado? When the world comes crashing in around us, when the forces of evil seem to be winning. When evil motives are acted out and the consequences produce something that is fearsome and ferocious. It makes you wonder about human nature. Makes you question, what kind of people are we?

Rabbi Sasso, when she was here this past week on Tuesday night, talked about the dinner being served at the Catholic school and the food line included a tray of apples, and above the apples, a professionally made sign that said, "Take only one. Remember, God is watching you." And further down the line, there was a tray of brownies, and someone had crafted a roughly drawn sign and taped it to the table, and she said that sign said, "Take as many brownies as you like, God's watching the apples."

The idea that God's watching us, the idea that evil exists, the destruction that comes as buildings fall, and Jesus said think about those buildings are going to fall. When you think about that, look back at that poor widow. And today, he would point us to those shoe are giving of pure motives, whose motives are in tune with the greater good. There are people like that. Look at the goodness, look at the honesty. Look at the honest-to-goodness. Think of Emily Keys, who text messaged to her parents before she was murdered at Deer Creek High School, "I love you guys." Or Elizabeth Smart, kidnapped from her bed in her home when she was 14, held captive for months by some crazed couple caught up in some kind of active insanity and polygamy. Told that they would kill her, and they would kill her parents if she tried to escape. You think there's evil in the world, think of Elizabeth Smart, because she overcame evil with love. Because she caught sight of the love of her parents as she started to think about what would happen if she ever got out of there. Would anybody, could anybody ever love her? Was her life basically over? And she realized that her parents would never stop loving her. And then she knew she could escape. And then she knew she could survive. Elizabeth Smart knew, at that point, that there would come a time when she could get out, that love conquers evil and it always has, it always will.

This past Thursday, we honored those who have served and are serving in the military. We took time to say thank you. John Dernbach is an environmental expert at Widener University. He thought about the veterans, the active military that people in his family, what he called the greatest generation, his parents, an uncle named Jim whose B17 was

shot down in Germany in the spring of 1945, and who lived to tell the story, and they all died, and John put a statement on their tombstones, every one of them, that said "They gave up their today for our tomorrow." When the buildings fall, evil motives win. When disaster hits, the poor widow, look at her. It's all good. We are filled with the capacity for goodness and greatness when we live out our goodness. Goodness abounds in the world. There are people who give from their poverty. There are people who operate from the goodness of their hearts. It's all good.

Yeah, there's some bad. But there is good in the world. The little child who provided the fish when Jesus turned a happy meal into a banquet, for example. The owner of the upper room who provided a place for the last meal that became the Last Supper, for example. The innkeeper who opened up the stable cave for Mary and Joseph who turned a homeless night into a nativity and put Bethlehem on the map in a way that it hadn't been since David was a baby, for example. The high school girl with a gun to her head, asked if she believed in God, and she said yes, and the gun went off, at Columbine, for example. And Eleanor Yates, one of the members of our church painted this beautiful mural, and Cassie Bernal is in that mural, because Eleanor Yates wanted us to remember, in the midst of the chaos and destruction, there is pure love and faith. It's good, it's all good. It's original good.

It happened in a war. It's described by a journalist. It was the second Gulf war. IN the background, there was a plume of smoke. That was Baghdad burning. Buildings falling. A platoon of Marines in Humvees going out of the city when they were ambushed by a detachment of republican guard, and the Humvees formed a circle and bullets were flying in that intersection of life and death. In the midst of that comes one Navy corpsman. He is seen carrying out two wounded Marines to a waiting chopper where they would be taken to a field hospital for surgery and treatment. And then that corpsman went back into the danger zone, and he emerged once more with another wounded soldier on his back. And the British news agency watching from the sideline yelled out at the young man, "Hey, don't you see, didn't you notice, that's not a Marine you got. Don't you know, didn't you notice, you have an Iraqi soldier? Why are you trying to help him?" And the young Navy corpsman gives a gesture toward the news crew, the kind we don't suggest in polite circles. And the smoke is rising. And the buildings are falling and the world's on fire, and the Navy corpsman looks at the news crew and he doesn't slow up his step, but he says, "Didn't you notice, don't you know? Caring for the wounded, that's what we do. We're Americans." All at once on the battlefield there was quiet and something beautiful emerged. It's all good. Original good. It's the union of all of us with each of us. It's the truth that there is good in the human heart, all good. It's the wisdom of the ages that was witnessed when the poor widow put the two coins on the table, and the disciples thought about the fall of the temple.

So what is there to learn when we read the story and see it in its context? The scribes who thought they were special and Jesus said, "Look at her, look at the widow and the gift she gave." We're all special. And after she gave the coins and they were discussing the destruction of the buildings, Jesus said, "Look at her, the widow, she gave all she had. Her gift is pure. Her life is pure good." Even when buildings fall. Even when destructive

power seems to prevail, think of the poor widow in the future. It's all good, most of life. The widow's story, in context, says "Be gentle to each other. Be hopeful about life. Nothing to fear. Keep the faith."

By the way, why should we support the church? You tell me. Where else are we reminded on a weekly basis that we are all special, that life is mostly good. Let us pray.

Let the word go out from this church, and our classes and our meetings and our music and our rituals and our sermons, that everyone is special, that all in all, when you add it up, in life, it's all good. Amen.