

Mark 12:38-44

As he taught, he said, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.' 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.'

“Going Home” Rev. Eugene Lowry November 21, 2010

Good morning. It is wonderful to be back the third time. It is becoming the highlight of the year. I just don't know where you can go to find a congregation, a church like this. I mean, there's so much of it that it's just so startling. It was startling the first time. Then again, I'd forgotten how wonderful it was, and now the third. The warmth of people who greet you so generously, and the competence of a wonderful staff that know what they're doing. I can tell you, because I've been some other places, and I tell you, yes competence of the staff. It is incredible. And the music. We had wonderful music in the first service, and now again, this service. I wonder, do you know how blessed you are with the music program that you have here?

It is just incredible, and it's wonderful to be back. Thanks for the graciousness of the welcome this morning. Return to the text - I guess you've had the text before, for a couple of weeks. I'm beginning with the 38th verse of the 12th chapter of Mark.

As Jesus taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.' 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.' This is the Gospel of our Lord.

It is pretty clear by the Foreword to the passage, that Jesus is not in a very good mood. He's unhappy with people in power. You understand, he's not unhappy with people in other communions, other directions, some other power group. It's his power group, his community of faith, the chosen people of God. It is here that he's resentful for the

behavior of those in power. He chooses the scribes this time. He'll choose other members another time. But he says just to note how people in power operate. He said, for one thing, they love to walk around in long robes. They like to be respected in the marketplace, the tip of the hat, so to speak. They even desire the best seats in the synagogue, and the head table at banquet time, where he is brought in to bless the people down there. And also love to say long prayers, to be noticed, of course.

And then there's a break in the text. It says "They devour widows' houses." Now I don't know precisely, I don't think anybody knows precisely the situation that is being referred to, but it's some sort of systemic injustice, where people who have power do in people who don't have power. Never happens today, of course. But people of power do in those who are on the margins of society, and then wind up, of course, blaming them for it as well. So he's unhappy. He sits down by the treasury, watching people come to give their offerings, their tithes and offerings. Now, what the treasury means is, here's the temple wall, and we're outside the temple. There are 13 big entryways to give money. It's like a bell of a big bear tone, it's brass. 13 of them, and you come up, so when you put in your money, which are coins, not paper, when you put them in it makes quite a noise, and if you give in a lot, it makes quite a lot of noise for quite a long time. And he notices in fact that some of the richest of the rich, beyond affluent, actually, you can see them come in the circle drive in the stretch limo chariots, and somebody pops out and opens the door quickly for them. Here they come out with this big load. Well it's big to see, it's not big to them. It's a heavy thing to get to the bell to put in, and when they put it lasts..... I don't have enough breath to do it long enough. And people are so impressed, they turn and say, "Oh, who was that?" It is very impressive. Jesus was impressed, you notice in the text, don't you.

And then here comes this poor woman, a widow. She comes clutching something in her hand. She comes up to one of the 13 and drops in the two coins. How do we know it was two and not three? Two and not one? Simple. You could hear it. They were copper. Clink, clink. That's it. That's all she gave. Well, it's all she had. Clink, clink. He nudges his disciples and says, "Did you see that? Did you notice that? Could you hear that?" And he said, "She gave more than all the rest of the folks who gave, because they gave out of their abundance." For some it was no doubt so much and yet not even noticeable in their budget. I mean they just had so much everywhere, in all their accounts, etc. etc. They wouldn't miss this, even though it looked like a lot to others. But she, out of her poverty, gave everything.

That kind of tugs at your heartstrings, doesn't it? Don't you feel sentimental about it? The generosity of the lovely lady, the widow, the poor woman. Well, is that the right response that we ought to have? What would you think if I said this is a foolish moment? Maybe call it stupid moment? I mean, after all, she doesn't have anything, she's poor, there's nothing at home to go to, she's brought in everything that she has. She brings it to the temple and plops it in, clink, clink, and goes home empty. What's going to happen in three or four days? Well you know, they have a committee in the temple that's responsible for helping the widow and the orphans. So guess what's going to happen in three or four days? Somebody's going to show up at her place to bring her some money to

buy bread, because the cupboard is empty. She doesn't have anything. They'll have to bring money back, probably more than she brought in. Why wouldn't it be more efficient for her just to stay at home? Do you sense the foolishness of it? They wouldn't have to bring so much.

Well, I once thought that, but that was before I met Mrs. Minnie Rebeki. Mrs. Rebeki was a parishioner of mine, when I was serving a church while in graduate school in theology in New Jersey. I was serving a church in New Jersey, right there at the Hudson River, just across from Manhattan at about 60th Street, and she was faithful through the four years that I was there. She was always there. She was a rather large woman, and the ankles were quite swollen. I didn't know quite why yet. But at any rate, she was always there, rain or shine, whatever. She sang in the choir and did whatever she was asked to do.

The first time I met her, really, to sit down and talk, was the first summer, because I was appointed there in June, but school didn't start till September, and the small flock of mine, few of the hundred people at that church, and I decided to use the summer to get acquainted, so I started making calls on the people to get acquainted before I headed off to school. It was in the middle of August when I got to Mrs. Minnie Rebeki's place. She lived over on 54th street and I thought about that. That's quite a ways, it's over a mile from the church. She doesn't own a car. She has to walk. Every time, has to walk, no matter what the weather, and with those ankles.

Anyway, I went to the apartment. It was a rundown apartment. Understand in Western New York, New Jersey, 9/10ths of a square mile, and 45,000 people live right there, most all of them, 99% in apartment houses, and most of them not very good apartment houses. At any rate, I got out, I went into the apartment house. It was dingy. You see the brass mail slots where you can with a key open it up, and a button underneath with a name across the side. A couple of the buttons were gone, actually. I looked around, but that wasn't all that was gone. Mrs. Minnie Rebeki's name was gone. It wasn't anywhere across the bank of brass mail slots. I saw a button that said "Manager." I pressed the button, and pretty soon one came. I said, "I'm Pastor Lowry and I'm trying to find a Mrs. Minnie Rebeki. I thought she live here. I don't see her name." "Oh," he said. "She lives down in the basement. She doesn't live here, so you didn't see her name, but if you'll go out and hang a left twice, you know there's an open spot, kind a tunnel on top of the ground that they built when they built the apartment. You walk through it, around to the side, hang a right, and down four or five steps. Go into that door, you'll see a big furnace. Go around it counter-clockwise, down the hall there's a door on the right, and if you'll rap on the door, that's where she lives."

So I rapped on the door, she opened the door, welcomed me into her place. Her apartment. One room apartment. Over to the left was a single bed, a picture of Jesus there on the wall. And over here a little couch that would seat two. Two chairs and a little table, and metal shelving over here. Two doors, I take it one was a bathroom and one was a closet. That's her place. And I found out something about the angles. I discovered that Minnie Rebeki worked in the garment section of New York City in Manhattan. She had

to walk to find public transportation, probably the Wehauken Ferry to get across, to get a crosstown bus and finally arrive at work, and she stood on concrete eight hours every day, had for decades. Eight hours a day on concrete, and that's how she made her living. She also told me about her son who had recently been in a terrible accident. It was going to take years to recover and get use of all the parts of his body. He was in a forklift, he backed what he thought was backed into a freight elevator but it was down two floors, and so the equipment and he fell two floors. He was terribly, terribly injured. She said, "I give him fifteen dollars a week. I'd love to give more, but I can't do much better than fifteen dollars." She said, "My take-home pay is \$39 dollars, and fifteen is all I can share with him, but I want to do as much as I can." So I learned about him.

Now, \$39, we're not in the Depression, I'm not that old. It wasn't in the Thirties. This was like Sixties. \$39 a week take-home pay. I got to meet her and went on my way. About three years later, well, it happened every year, but I'm thinking of one about three years later, we had something called a Stewardship Emphasis. You may be familiar with that. In fact, we had a Stewardship Sunday. Have you heard of that? And the way it worked is this. All the mailing that you got that tell about what the church is doing, and so forth, and all the information, we did it all. And then on this day was the day you're supposed to turn in your pledge cards on this particular day. You know it's funny, but there are some people, regular people, who don't happen to be there that day. Don't know why, that's the day they seem to miss sometimes, Stewardship Sunday. And some actually are there but don't turn one in.

And so there was a committee that would meet on Stewardship Sunday to have a sandwich, and then they were going to go calling. I would check off the cards the names of the people on the cards I'd received, and then they gathered to go out two by two to see the baddies. Yes, they'd go see the baddies, the ones who either weren't there, hadn't turned it in, or whatever. I happened to run into Minnie Rebeci's card. She was there, had turned it in. She was going to pledge three dollars a week for the work of the church and its ministry, and I knew that wasn't right. That was way too generous, she didn't have that much money. She's generous already, sings in the choir, she does so much, she does everything she's asked to do. I knew that I needed to talk to Mrs. Rebeci. So without letting them know, I took that card and slipped it in my jacket pocket and said to them, "Good luck as you head out to the baddies." And I'll join you back at a certain hour, and I'll do the work that I'm supposed to do in the meantime.

I went to 54th Street to see Minnie Rebeci. Now, I did not walk. I drove, of course. It's over a mile. And I went down through the tunnel and down and around the octopus, I'm sure there was asbestos in the furnace that I walked around, and knocked on the door. Was she ever surprised that I would come calling on that day. She knew I was going to be calling on the baddies. And she wasn't one of them. And so she was surprised and asked me to sit down. I said, "I'll tell you why I came to call." I reached for the card, pulled the card out, and said, "This is your card, your commitment, for next year. And I happen to know something about your finances, and your son's accident, I know those things, and this is generous and it's wonderful and the spirit is just terrific, but Mrs. Rebeci, you can't

afford three dollars a week. So I'm here to ask you to cancel this pledge, or at least to reduce it to something more reasonable for your situation. That's why I'm here."

There was a long pause. She was looking down. She looked up and said, "Pastor Lowry..." That seemed a little formal a beginning in the middle of a conversation. "Pastor Lowry," she said, "You know about my son and you know about my finances. But there's a lot about my life you do not know, and I'm not going to go into great detail, but I'll tell you this. Many years before his accident, I was going through a terrible time in my life. I didn't know how I could possibly survive all that I was going through. It was a terrible night of the soul." She said, "It was awful, I couldn't make it through." She said, "I got right down there on my knees next to the bed, looked up in Jesus' eyes, and I got to praying." She said, "Oh God, see me through my trouble. Oh, God, see me through what I'm going through." She said, "I didn't go to church back in those days. A lot of things I didn't do. I'll get my life right, I'll go to church, I'll tithe whatever I earn, just please oh God see me through my trouble."

Long pause. She said, "Pastor Lowry, God saw me through my trouble, and you can believe I'm going to keep my end of the deal." Well, what do you do at a moment like that? You back out of there just as quickly as you can, before you embarrass yourself any further, that's what you do. And I want to tell you, from that day to this, I've never as a pastor or in any other role, never have I asked anybody to reduce or cancel a pledge. Never. Never again. Because you don't know what it means. You don't know what's going on. You see, I had a simple, call that simplistic, idea, about stewardship. I thought we were supposed to be stewards because we ought to, because we must, because it's a responsibility, because after all it's a duty, don't you know? We ought to do it, we must do it. We of course are going to do our duty.

It wasn't a duty for Minnie Rebeci. It was a marvelous moment of gratitude, don't you know? I mean, she didn't think of it as a duty. She was so grateful God had seen her through the dark night of the soul. God had seen her through her trouble, and she's going to show her gratitude. And she showed it. She was celebrating. When people are celebrating, that's why the give, don't mess with them. Leave them alone. It's a wonderful, beautiful thing. She was celebrating. Have you ever noticed? You never celebrate anything except something that's wonderful and impossible. But yet happens. Have you noticed? When things are routine, you get stuff done, but you only celebrate, you only jump up and down and click your heels, you only do that when something immensely wonderful has happened and you can hardly believe it. It couldn't happen, but it did. Oh, she was celebrating. Don't mess with it.

You know, some people don't get it, though. Some people don't get it. And I found one of those people on Ward Parkway, in Kansas City. I was coming out of the plaza, a pretty fancy part of Kansas City, coming up through the high rent district, the big houses, finally getting far enough away that I could find where we live in the lower rent district. This is a parkway, grass in between, lovely trees, magnificent houses, and I came around out of the plaza. I was in the right lane. In the middle lane, headed south, was this car. I couldn't believe it. You understand, I come out of the car business. I know cars, or once knew

cars. I'd never seen a car like this, never ever. I'd seen pictures of them in magazines, but I'd never seen... I couldn't imagine someone actually could own one. It was way back, this was two or three decades ago, it was six figures, big six figures. I mean, it was huge. I couldn't believe it. I kind of wanted to see who was in the driver's seat, so I moved over to the middle lane to look. I didn't get much of a view from behind the car, and I think I began to drool down the sides of the mouth. Then I made a mistake and looked at the tag. It was a vanity tag. I was looking at it, and you know it knew I was looking at it. And the driver knew what I was thinking while looking at it. Do you know what the vanity tag said? It said, EARN IT. That's what it said. EARN IT. You see, it was a sermon. A bad sermon, aimed at me. It said, "So you're drooling about the car that I have? I'll tell you why I have it. Because I have it coming. I've earned it. You're envious? Stop the envy. If you want it, just go earn it."

Maybe some of you are even old enough to remember the ad by a brokerage house who hired this English actor with a round face and a gravelly voice. You remember? "We make money the old fashioned way. We EARN it." Well, the guy died. They had to stop the ad. Because nobody else had the round face, the British accent and the gravelly voice. Maybe this guy was a broker, I don't know. But I'll tell you what I do know absolutely. The guy's cheap. He's tight. You say, "How do you know that? You don't even know the name, let alone, you've never met him. How would you know?" Because of the tag. Not all wealthy people are tight. Some wealthy people are, in fact, very generous. But not this guy. The tag said more than he knew it said. It said something about the character of his soul, because if you think what you have, you have because you deserve it, you're not going to give to anybody because "It's mine." Do you understand the principle? "Mine, you can't have it. I earned it. You want it? Go earn it."

I don't know what he did for a living in fact, but I'll tell you this, he never worked a single day in his life any harder than Minnie Rebecki worked every day of her life. But what a difference of spirit. Because you see, he thought he earned it. She thought the grace of God was undeserved and impossible even to imagine, but it happened, it happened, and so she was celebrating. What happened, it was amazing. What a difference between when you think you have it coming and when you think you never had it coming, but God is so gracious. So, don't you be feeling sorry for the widow in this story.

Now, I know on the face of it, it seems like she went home empty, while everybody else had money to spare, all they every wanted. But no, don't think of it that way. The truth is, as Jesus said to us, the truth of the matter is, the rest is the big load. They went home empty. The widow, who no doubt was grateful for some dark night of the soul she'd been through, and grateful for God who'd seen her through it, she didn't go home empty. She went home full.