

FIRST LESSON: Proverbs 11: 24-26; 28  
SECOND LESSON: Mark 12:38-44  
November 10, 2024  
STEWARDSHIP SUNDAY

***“Partnering with God”***  
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

A man was walking along the beach, enjoying an afternoon vacation stroll, when he heard someone screaming. Looking around he saw an obviously distraught woman kneeling next to a little girl. The man quickly determined the child had swallowed something that was blocking her airway. He put his arms around the child, made a fist and held it with his other hand right below her ribcage and pulled upward and inward, doing a perfect Heimlich maneuver. Sure enough, the child started to sputter and cough and spit a coin onto the sand.

“Oh, thank you sir!” cried the grateful mother. You seemed to know exactly what to do. Are you a doctor?”

“No, ma’am,” the man replied. “I’m retired. But I am the chair of the stewardship committee for my church.”

Welcome to Stewardship Sunday!

Jesus began his teaching today by warning his listeners against, “the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers.”

Who on earth are these people? They dress in style, walking around in flowing robes. Clearly they don’t do physical labor. Their academic and religious qualifications are on show for all to see. It’s obvious that they are “important.” And these important men have the best seats in the synagogues. They sit at the front and look out on the congregation, more to be seen than anything else. Shopkeepers defer to them and seek their business. They are seated in places of honor at banquets. But where exactly does all the wealth and influence come from?

The men Jesus was talking about were scribes, and among other things, a scribe **was a lawyer**. Scribes gave legal advice. They helped draw up documents and written agreements. They advised people. They were not *supposed* to charge people, but of course they found ways around this. A vulnerable widow, unaware of the intricacies of the law or exactly how much services cost, was an easy mark. A widow would believe a respected and highly educated man of God when he said the payment of large fees were necessary,

or steered her in dubious directions in her investments. For Jesus to specifically mention devouring widows houses it must have been a grievously common abuse of power.

Jesus was sitting directly opposite one of the large trumpet shaped metal containers set up for donations when this conversation took place. They were extremely heavy. No one could just abscond with one. While he watched many rich people came and put in large amounts of money. This was a very public act. It was all coinage so it was loud. Paper money is a modern invention. Everyone could see and hear the generous donations these men were making. And no doubt some of these men were the very scribes Jesus had just mentioned, the ones who stood in the synagogue proclaiming long prayers out loud so everyone would know how holy they were. A poor widow came at the same time and put in two small coins. Our translation says they were worth a few pennies, but in today's money it is more like a few dollars, enough for a very cheap lunch. Apparently, it was all she had.

There are a lot of different directions we could go with this text. In fact, many televangelists have taken a page out of the scribe's rule book and used it to their advantage. They argue that the widow gave everything she had, so their target audience should give everything too, preaching to their congregations that unless it hurts it doesn't count. I think we have all noticed that none of them are particularly hurting financially themselves.

Beware of the scribes. They might pretend to be your friend, but they have billable hours. Beware of those who make public displays of their piety and generosity. They do not act out of love, but out of conceit. The example of the widow does not tell us that we must give everything we have. It says that we should fully trust God to take care of us. Jesus commends this woman for her faith and trust in God. And he equally condemns those who give in order to gain public praise. They have already received their reward.

Patronage is part of almost every culture. The wealthy pay for a grand building for public use. In Rome it was a way of reminding people who they should be loyal to. The very rich at that time also sponsored large and expensive public entertainments. Corporations sponsor the Olympics and sporting events today. The donors who give millions have their names on hospital wings, university buildings and public theaters. They pay for the naming rights on stadiums. And they have gotten what they at least partially set out to get—public recognition and praise. It's not that these contributions are wrong. Many of these institutions do wonderful things. God wants us to give, but God wants us to give anonymously, not so we should receive public acclaim.

Churches have to ask for money in order to stay open. We depend upon people giving, but it's an awkward position to be in. Pastors are literally in the position of having to ask people to pay their salary and the salaries of other support staff. And if the building has a problem needing to be fixed—someone has to pay the bill. The cost of keeping a building running has to come from somewhere too. But these needs tend to be low on the priority list for people without a lot of disposable income. Every ancestor congregation of this one, and there are five from different branches, had its struggles. They tried everything from pew rents to subscriptions to straight up appeals. In 1910 at

the West Hope Church attendance at the evening service was free; the morning service was not. Three guesses as to which service had more people.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century we have moved to stewardship campaigns and teaching about tithing and percentage giving. But people still don't want to part with their money. Ironically enough, charismatic televangelist conmen are pretty good at getting people to part with their money. Manipulative people without scruples don't have the same problems that the honest and faithful do. In 1987, Oral Roberts made the news by claiming that God told him if he didn't raise 8 million dollars in the next three months he would die. He was trying to bail out his failed medical center "The City of Faith Medical and Research Center." Roberts got 9 million dollars from gullible people, but the "City of Faith," a very ill-conceived venture in the first place, closed in 1989.

Unlike Oral Roberts, I'm not going to tell you I'm going to die if people don't give. But this church will. That is simply a fact. We support what we believe in. We don't support what we don't believe in. There is no way that with a congregation our size we can meet all of our bills without our endowment. But at our current rate we are pulling so much out of the endowment that we will run out in about seven years. Without growth in numbers and growth in giving the doors will close. *But we've been here before.* The reason we even have an endowment is because members in the past twenty-five years have given generously to this church. They believed in our future and they bought us time. Leroy Parke and Dorothy McClurken have given us a chance. I knew them both personally and I knew how important they believed this church was.

Jesus talked about money because we have a problem with it. Money usurps God in our lives faster and more effectively than anything else. Having money makes us feel secure. Not having money makes us feel panicked. Money—or lack of money—consumes our attention. And fear about not having enough money causes us to hold back. It makes us a prisoner of money. Generosity, however, is not defined as giving away absolutely everything we own. Proverbs says, "One person gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed." And Proverbs also includes a warning about not trusting in money. "Those who trust in their riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf."

God doesn't want us to live by greed or fear. God does not want us to give in order to gain the praise of others. Nor should we ever let anyone manipulate us with false promises. God wants us to fully trust that our needs will be met just as the poor widow did, in times of abundance and in times of poverty, and God wants us to give generously, freely, compassionately and with gratitude in our heart. Today as we commit to our giving to the church and our giving to special causes outside of the church let us do so with trust and faith. Amen

Proverbs 11: 24-26; 28

<sup>24</sup> One person gives freely, yet gains even more;  
another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.

**25** A generous person will prosper;  
whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.

**26** People curse the one who hoards grain,  
but they pray God's blessing on the one who is willing to sell.

**28** Those who trust in their riches will fall,  
but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.

Mark 12:38-44

**38** As he taught, Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, **39** and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. **40** They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely."

**41** Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. **42** But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.

**43** Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. **44** They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."