

Proper 27B “Truly I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box.” Mk. 12.43

There was a man who planted a vineyard. He built a wall around it so that animals and thieves could not get in and spoil the grapes. He built a tower in the middle of it and also a winepress on site to simplify the production of wine from his vineyard. He was a business man, with many other interests besides wine production. He rented this fully functional vineyard to local farmers and went far away to conduct other business, expecting them to maintain and develop his vineyard. Harvest time came, and the man sent one of his employees to receive the profit from his business venture. Instead, the local farmers who were tending the vineyard beat him up and sent him back to the owner with nothing. This man was a patient man and so he continued to send his representatives, hoping that the farmers renting his vineyard would come to a better mind and give him the profit that was his due. He did, after all, own the vineyard, and had every right to expect some return for his investment. But the men who tended the vineyard continued to harass and even kill the owner’s envoys. In a last ditch effort, the owner sent his own son to

persuade the farmers that they should indeed deliver some profit to the owner of the vineyard. Instead, they killed him, and dropped his dead body over the wall. There was nothing left to do at this point, but for the owner to return in person. But instead of coming with diplomats and messages of peace, he came with his army and destroyed the farmers who had refused his claims for so long. Then he gave the vineyard into the care of other farmers who would pay him his due.

I begin my sermon today with the Parable of the Wicked Tenants because it stands at the head of the dispute between Jesus and his enemies as he stood in the Temple courts just days before his death. Not only does the parable give us a narrative context within which we may understand Jesus' whole ministry, but take another step back and we may see the broad sweep of the Father's offer of mercy and forgiveness to his wayward people Israel. Jesus was not the only messenger to have come from the land owner. No, he had come at the end of a century's long line of prophets who had died trying to get the fruit from the vineyard. Even so the prophet Isaiah wrote, "The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of

Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!”

Likewise, we can see that this parable functions to tell what time it is and who the players are. For the prophets had come, they had been refused, and they had died. These were the owners servants. Who is the one who comes after the servants have run their course? The owner’s son must come and he must die. Then comes the judgment. Where are we in the story? Jesus had arrived triumphantly in Jerusalem, had laid his claim upon the Temple and had disputed with the rulers. He was the son of the owner, and he must die.

It is within this context of parable, conflict, and revelation that we find this brief passage about the widow giving her mite, her two copper pennies. Jesus was sitting with his disciples in the Temple watching the people pass by. There, the powerful lawyers, politicians and rulers paraded among the populace. They enjoyed the attention that they received from the crowds as they flaunted their influence. They enjoyed wearing special clothes and sitting in the best seats. They had plenty of money, but they never missed an opportunity to

steal more from poor widows. We should never underestimate the power of piety as a tool for the powerful to take money from the weak. While we are quick to point fingers at televangelists like Jimmy Swaggart and Kenneth Copeland we should be careful not to forget that feigned piety is the stock in trade of politicians from George W. Bush to John Edwards. A professed commitment to a higher cause wraps the leader in a mantle of credibility all the while they quietly cut away the purse strings of their admirers.

So Jesus sat with his disciples near the Treasury in the Temple. We live in an age and land where we are so surrounded by financial services that we may miss the importance of the setting. We have banks available to us at almost every turn. There are the US Treasury and the Federal Reserve. There are brokerage firms and local banks. But the Temple served as the royal treasury and was itself opulent in its grandeur. And not only did the Temple contain wealth, it required a great deal of money for its upkeep and service. There were the daily sacrifices to perform which required wood and animals and staff to maintain it all. There were the grain offerings and the offerings of oil and mint and dill. The variety of them all was more than our minds

could imagine! And it was here at the Treasury that the pious could come and make offerings to the Temple and the worship of the God of Israel. The wealthy made great contributions and the widow dropped in her two copper coins.

Set within this grand and chaotic scene, we may almost miss this lesson and this woman. For the noise of the crowds, the blast of trumpets, and bleating of sheep she is all but silent. By the brilliance of the Temple and the jingle of coins in the bags of the wealthy, she and her offering are all but invisible. She is out of place. What could she have given that would have made any difference to the state of affairs? Would her two coppers have paid for a single sacrifice or a bit of wood to burn it with? What could the God of such a grand and mighty place have wanted with her pittance? He was much too big to mind such a small offering. But what about her and her family? They might have made a meager meal from those coins. Wouldn't she have been a better steward of her money to have kept them for herself and provided what she could from her savings? These are reasonable concerns that she might have considered before performing such a rash deed.

But Jesus called his disciples' attention to her. Jesus, the Lord of Heaven and Earth, the King of Israel and High Priest over the Temple, had seen her and her gift. He had not been so distracted by the commotion of the moment that he had not seen the widow and her gift, and had not known the depths of her heart as she made an offering unto Almighty God. Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything that she had, all she had to live on." Contrary to human wisdom, the widow had given the greatest gift that day. It was not the prince or the scribe with the weight of their treasure that had given most. They had more to spare. It was not the king or the priest with their pomp that had made an acceptable offering to God, for they had received their reward at the hands of their fellow man. No, Jesus said that the poor widow had made an acceptable offering because she had given out of her scarcity and had offered it to the glory of God.

We may rightly ask, then, how do we evaluate charitable giving? As in Jesus' day we tend to pay attention to the monumental gifts given by the wealthy in our own day. In 2008 Bill and Melinda Gates announced that they would give \$58 billion to charity. Likewise, we have many in our own communities who give substantial sums to build libraries, schools and hospitals. These are great and noteworthy. But is the size of the gift the measure by which we judge charity? According to Jesus, it does not seem so. Instead, the proportion and purpose of the gift are much more important. By proportion I mean to indicate the amount of sacrifice or inconvenience the giving of the gift would cause. A \$1 billion gift for some might not change their lifestyle, but for another \$1000 would mean destitution. When asked about how Christians should give, the Anglican writer CS Lewis said that there was no question of some prescribed figure. Instead, he wrote, Christians should give to such an extent that there could be no possibility of keeping up with the Jones.

But proportionality is not the only criterion. The second is as much if not more important: purpose. This is a matter of the heart. There are many philanthropists in this world. They are literally "lovers of

humanity". They may give to the relief of the poor, the orphaned and the hungry. They may give to the spread of literacy by building universities and establishing large endowments for funding faculties. When asked why they have done all these things they may say that they have compassion on the suffering of their fellowman, or they may say that they wanted to leave behind a legacy for their family name. In either case they are "lovers of humanity". But in the mind of Christ and in the pages of Scripture it seems evident that true charity is performed by "philotheists" not philanthropists. True charity is offered by "lovers of God" not by "lovers of humanity". For Paul wrote to the Corinthians regarding the generosity of the church in Macedonia, "Their extreme poverty has overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part, and that not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord, and then by the will of God, to us." It is that giving to charity for the glory of God and the furtherance of his kingdom that is an offering of sweet-smelling savor to the Lord.

How, then, shall we go about our lives of charity? What are practical ways instructing us how to give of our possessions? We should take the widow for our example. We should give of our charity secretly. In

the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned against advertising our generosity the way that the hypocrites did, blowing the trumpet as they contributed. Instead, Jesus said to make sure that our left hand didn't know what our right hand was doing. This is truly confidential! This is not to say that all of our giving must be done privately. There are occasions in which public benevolence may be opportunities to give a good example. But we must be careful to offer our alms and gifts to God and not for the approval of our neighbors.

And not only should we give secretly, but we must give cheerfully. We cannot possibly know what had preceded this moment in the widow's life. She was evidently poor and so we may surmise that her life had been marked by shortage and scarcity. Yet she stood in the Temple of the Lord and offered what little she had. No one compelled her. No one threatened her or demanded of her such an inconsequential gift. So we may be confident that she gave with a full heart, though her life was so empty of the comforts of this world. We may be sure that her cup overflowed with joy before the Lord, though she struggled to place food upon her table. She was, as Paul exhorted Timothy, "ready to do good, rich in good works, generous and ready to share, thus

storing up treasure for herself as a good foundation for the future, so that she could take hold of that which is truly life.”

But what, we may ask, has this widow and her charity to do with the Parable of the Wicked Tenants? Paul answers the question when he wrote the Corinthians, “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.” The owner of the vineyard, like the widow, gave his all by sending his son. The son, like the widow, gave his all by obeying the will of his father and going and dying at the hands of the wicked tenants. Giving up one’s whole life is theme throughout Mark’s gospel, but especially in this chapter in which the Son of God and Son of Mary stands in the Temple, and is rejected by his own people. But he, like the widow, gave his all and he gave it to the glory of God. Shall we not do likewise?