

Can We Talk?

Mark 12:38-44

Can we talk? A stand-up comic used to use this line as a way to draw her audience closer to her. Today, it is an invitation to share what we really think about life. It's an invitation to talk honestly about how we cope and how we find meaning. I invite you to consider how we manage to live our lives. Can we talk?

Today's scripture lesson is the story we often call the *widow's mite*. The contrast Jesus draws is the contrast between large offerings of the rich men and the meager poor gift of a widow. I want to review the story and its meaning. I also want to ask for your thoughts about money, about your gifts, and about how you make priorities for yourself and your family. Finally, I want to consider the deeper meaning of this story.

This sermon is the last in a series I might have called *The Way of the Cross* had I come up with a title for it. I didn't think of it as a series *per se*, but it has turned out to be just that. We have been following the geographical and pedagogical journey of Jesus, in Mark's Gospel, as he makes his way toward Jerusalem for his final encounter with the *Powers That Be* of his day. This has been a geographical journey beginning on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee and finishing today in the great Temple in Jerusalem. It has been a pedagogical journey, a teaching journey, as Jesus unfolds the secrets of the Kingdom of God to his disciples, teaching them about what it means to live in that Kingdom as a present reality in this world right now. Jesus was teaching them about *The Way of the Cross*, the path he was walking that would lead him to his own death on a cross.

Through a process of healing and teaching, Jesus seems to be rejecting the popular belief of the true messiah as a triumphant, conquering king. In effect, he seems to reject the idea of Jesus as another David, the heroic, conquering king of Israel's glorious past. He does this by contrasting the rich with the poor, and the powerful with the weak. In today's story, he contrasts the Temple scribes with the poor widow. Then he identifies God with the poor and helpless ones.

As Jesus' journey culminates in Jerusalem at the Temple, so also does his teaching culminate in rejecting both the Temple and its leaders. Not only does he consider them religious hypocrites, but he exposes their participation in the financial and social oppression of people like the widow. The scribes are always seeking status and honor while, at the same time, "devouring the estates of widows". This is the opposite of what they should be doing.

One very important meaning of this story of the widow's mite is the importance of the priorities we set. Her example challenges us with regard to our personal financial stewardship. The faithfulness of her giving cannot be measured in the actual size of her gift, but in giving as a percentage of the whole of her financial worth. For this reason, we as a congregation encourage each other to give a percentage of our own income to the church.

It is important for us today, we who call ourselves Christians, to take seriously this idea of personal and family financial stewardship. There is nothing magical in 10% giving. It comes from the biblical admonition we call *tithing*, giving ten percent of one's goods to the Temple (or synagogue). The widow evidently gave much more. Many give a much smaller percentage: 10%, 5%, 2%, or 1%. What's most important is the attitude of our giving.

Many of you take your financial giving to this congregation very seriously. It is indeed an integral part of your spiritual journey. Just as that journey is different for each of us, though with many common themes, so our process of working out our giving is individual. How do you

find a balance in your giving? How do you go about setting priorities in your overall financial stewardship as part of your journey of faith?

Financial stewardship is deeply spiritual because it involves how we live in this world. Jesus' focus on *The Way of the Cross* was an effort to teach his disciples, and us, how to live this life. Here is where we encounter eternity. Here is where we walk with God. Though the promise of eternity's deep mystery resounds within us, this world of time and space is where we live. Therefore, the stewardship of our possessions has everything to do with our faith and its practice.

The lesson of the widow and her meager, generous offering is, at one level, the lesson of Financial stewardship. But let us take care in our interpretation. Money is not evil. It is one of the many kinds of gifts we have in order to live *The Way of the Cross*. It is certainly not wrong for Christians to seek to make money. Those in business need to make a profit. Money is a tool that can be used for doing a great deal of good.

There is a great deal that IS wrong that is related to money. Many of us who have always had enough can come to assume that status as our right. Some who don't have enough become dependent on social systems and see that support as a right, an entitlement. Some have plenty, but never feel that it's enough. They are always grasping for more. The greater wrong is to exploit others for our gain. Wealth brings with it a responsibility to be aware of the whole context of the economic system and to work for the benefit of all people.

The second, and more important, lesson of this story is to hear Jesus' accusation that the Temple system actually contributed to the widow's poverty. The scribes and priests colluded with the wealthy and powerful, and also with an oppressive government. The result was the concentration of more wealth in fewer hands. The Temple system failed in its duty when it failed to help the widow.

The Message translation says this: "All the others gave what they'll never miss. She gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford. She gave her all."

The wealthy gave lots of money, but it was a tiny percentage of what they had. They hardly noticed it. And they didn't give it so much as they traded it for honor, glory, and appreciation.

The widow did not exercise good stewardship! She gave too much. Hers real gift was that of opulent and extravagant worship. She gave more than she could afford and was enriched by her giving.

The deeper meaning of this story is that the widow's gift reveals the moral bankruptcy of the Temple system. This is the same way that Jesus' giving his life reveals the moral bankruptcy of the Powers that Be in his culture and religion. They are revealed to be so far from God's values that Jesus, just a few verses later, repudiates the Temple's legitimacy. It does not reflect or represent God.

Financial stewardship is a window to Christian discipleship and a mirror to see our own values and priorities. The abundant life Jesus promised comes as the result of being free. It comes as a consequence of looking into the abyss of our deepest fears and there seeing love.

Can we talk? What would it take for you to be free with regard to money? One possible answer is to have tons of it, but that only entangles people more deeply. The more money we have, the more likely we are to be its prisoners. Another possible answer is to have no money. That's closer to being on target accept, with no money, it is hard to survive in our culture without being dependent on someone else.

The truest answer I know as to how to be free with regard to money does not depend on how much or how little you have. It depends on your attitude. It is to see money as just a tool to feed, clothe, and house our families and to make a difference in the world. Beyond that, money becomes the poor substitute in our lives for meaning, self-worth, security, and the blessing of love.

Money is just one of the gifts we have in our lives. What would it take for you to be free with regard to the other gifts you have? How would it feel to embrace and invest those gifts freely? There are two important journeys you and I will travel in our lives ultimately. One is the journey of discovering who we are. This includes discovering our gifts and our sense of calling in life. Taking this journey means traveling deeply within ourselves and deeply within our relationships, beneath the levels of accomplishment and shame we have experienced to the core of ourselves. This is the place where the Spirit waits for us and names us and reveals our gifts to us.

The second journey is that of living as our true selves, investing our gifts, following our calling, living deeply in community. This journey is also filled with the challenges of fear, the limits of our abilities, and the need to be continually creative. The willingness, notice I did not the ability, to be continually creative in our lives overcomes our own limits and the great enemy fear.

We are all called to these journeys: the winding roads, the narrow gates, and the unexpected turns. Not many find their way on them, at least not for long. But this is the way of the Kingdom of God. This is the journey of abundant life that Jesus promised. This is life in touch with the Holy. This is the *Way of the Cross*.