

Today, we have read Bible lessons about two widows, both of whom were poor, and both of whom were generous with what they had. The story of the widow's mite in the gospel is a little tough on ministers and other official church folk.

"Beware of scribes, who like to walk around in long robes . . ." Well, I wear them during service, but I don't walk around in them, much. " . . . and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, "Okay, I'll confess that it sometimes feels good when people in grocery stores and restaurants call me Reverend or Padre or Pastor and treat me a little extra nice. " . . . and to have the best seats in the synagogue," Well, I don't know if it's the best, but the chairs/bench up here are/is bigger and are/is different. " . . .and places of honor at banquets." What can I say, those who know me know I like to eat! "They devour widow's houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers." Okay, I'm clean on these two; Even when I as in banking, I've never tricked a widow out of her house, and I'm pretty well known for short prayers, not long ones; so perhaps I've escaped the "greater condemnation" by a narrow margin.

Whenever we hear a Bible story, one of the most important things we can ask ourselves is, "With whom do I identify, who in this story feels like me?" Of course, none of us would like to think we're like the scribes, making a big, loud public display of our religion; in particular, none of us wants to look like a hypocrite. And we all want to believe that we're like the widow, doing all we can with what little we have.

1

When most of us, most of the time, hear the widow's mite story, we think it means something like this: "See, it's not how much you give that matters, it's the spirit with which you give it that counts. A little bit is just as important as a lot." And, that's true, as far as it goes.

But, there's a reason for the title this morning. As I've just hinted, our text from the *Gospel according to Mark* is filled with choices. One choice comes

from the traditional interpretation of verses 41-44, the part of our reading this morning about the widow herself. The writer Mark goes to some lengths to tell us that this woman has put in the Temple treasury everything she owns — literally, *her life*, as the Greek says.

Yet, a traditional interpretation is as I gave just a minute ago: it is the spirit of giving that is important — not the amount. This tack softens the giving on the part of the widow and allows us to squirm out from under the detail *Mark* shares about the widow, in putting in two copper coins, a pittance, has put in all she had, all she owned, her whole livelihood. So, we have an interpretative choice to think about or dismiss the widow's plight after she's tossed her only two ha'pennies into the Temple treasury box.

Another choice in looking at this text is what to do with the crowd whom Mark points out as "throwing money at the treasury box." This isn't clear from our English translations, but when you look at the Greek word translated as "putting money...", there is no ambivalence — it means: to throw or let go of a thing without caring where it falls."

So, what do we do with this? Truth be told, most of us, myself included, most of the time, give out of our abundance. We give what we think we can afford to give without seriously affecting our standard of living. As I said earlier, identifying with characters in the Biblical stories is part of understanding what the Bible is telling us. And, for good or bad, I think it's relatively easy for us to identify with the crowd, even if we feel guilty about seeing ourselves as one of them.

And, moving back the beginning of our New Testament reading, it is not just me who has to struggle with identifying with the scribes. We all like it when people put us first, when others defer to our presence, our dress, our speeches, our position in church, in the larger community. But, again, we have interpretative choice — on what do we choose to focus?

Looking at the larger context in Mark's gospel telling are the issues of discipleship — who will you follow? and of identity — who is Jesus? In the chapter before our reading this morning Jesus has had a running conversation with the Pharisees and the Sadducees and their minions on

conversation with the Pharisees and the Sadducees and their minions on those two issues. Jesus was challenged on who He is to which He gives the parable of the vineyard illustrating that God had sent Him. And on the question of discipleship, Jesus gives both the declarative statement on rendering to Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God's; followed by Mark's telling of Jesus' call to live the Great Commandment.

Our reading continues this theme of discipleship. I think that's why we want

3

to soften the story, to focus on the widow's act; which I will confess, makes it easier to preach a stewardship sermon along with a call to sacrificial giving. But, all along, I've been trying to point out that we have a choice — not quite that of Occam's Razor — commonly paraphrased as the simpler meaning is the best; rather that we need to consider how our interpretations of the text influences our actions, our responses.

For example, this coming Thursday is Veteran's Day. From the time it was celebrated as Armistice Day back in 1919 until today it has been a reminder to honor our military servicemen and -women. Yet, stories abound of how Navy, Army & Air Force personnel struggle to make ends meet — both active duty as well as those who have mustered out. And, when these folk return from war zones, the difficulties they encounter in getting adequate physical and mental health care, of finding jobs that pay a living wage, of being respected and, yes, honored for putting their lives on the line, as a society, we need to consider our choices shaped by the Biblical narrative.

So you see, larger societal issues do come into play from our text. And, yes, a choice could be to limit our responses to within the church or congregation. But, then, one goes back to the purpose of the church, to the purpose of this congregation: How do we express God's love to all? In what ways and by what means do we provide Christian service to the community around us? (And how big is the community to be served?) Are we nurturing only ourselves, or does the phrase "neighbor" include the least of God's people — the poor, the orphan, and the widow.

And, finally, can we not see that in the act of giving her whole livelihood, the widow was casting herself on the mercy of God through the very religious organization that at the time participated in the system of “devouring widow’s houses?” What kind of response does that elicit from us? Ambivalence? Horror? Disgust? Or, compassion — the willingness to stand by and alongside those who are without food, shelter, clothing, and safety.

Does seeing this model of trust and faithfulness in God move us to emulate her and give sacrificially, in the same spirit of faith and trust? The giving by the widow is contrasted with that of the crowd; it is not about “buying our way into heaven” nor solely about the widow herself. The widow gave all that she had because she trusted in God, even, albeit from our perspective, a bit naively as she trusted her society to care for her.

But, then, we do that too. In investing money into the stock market, in buying lottery tickets, in trusting the pension plans. of the companies we’ve worked for. But, perhaps, more importantly, in giving to the church. Because, perhaps, it is best reflects, our trust and faith in God that God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, will guide the use of these funds so that widows are not cheated, that the poor will have dignity, and that the orphan will have a home.

Today we had chosen to focus on giving. And, while there are many types of giving, the theme of sacrifice bridges across physical, human, as well as financial forums. Through the lens of giving, we should be mindful of what

5

God has given us: firstly, God’s only Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus; Secondly, our lives themselves; and thirdly, the love we have for our family, friends, and biblical neighbors. However, in each, for each, through each, we are challenged by the choices we make: to God, to each other, to our local community, to the world. Will our choices and our giving make a difference to someone else?

Let us pray:

Heavenly God, we come at this moment in prayer. We are humbled by Your Son's teachings about Your Kingdom, about our living. We ask for Your guidance through the Holy Spirit to choose to give in grateful response to all that You have done for us — not just in our lives, but for the world in, through, and as Jesus the Christ. Keep us mindful of the needs of others; let us find the means and ways to help them; show us how such actions better all of our lives and enlarge Your Kingdom of grace, mercy, and love. Amen.