



MINISTER
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22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 12:38-44

What Happens Next?

Intro: Our New Testament reading is from Mark. As he often does, Mark puts two stories back to back in order to emphasize a point. Jesus is in the temple with the disciples and they aren't at worship, they are instead watching people. Jesus says look at those leaders who like good seats and long prayers, don't do what they do. Then he says take notice of this elderly woman, watch what she does. Let us listen for God's word as it comes through Mark's words. (Read/Pray)

A few years ago, a number of newspapers and TV stations picked up on a story of a winner in the American Family Publishers Sweepstakes. While it is always a long shot we are used to the idea that somebody wins these things each time around, so wasn't newsworthy

that another winner had been named. What had happened this time was that a notice arrived at the Bushnell Assembly of God church in Sumpter County Florida announcing that God was a finalist for the 11 million dollar top prize.

In the letter, the publishers wrote "God, we've been looking for you." It went on to suggest how surprised God's neighbors would be to hear that God had won! As I read the story I was surprised to discover that God's mailing address was in Florida. I have long thought northern Minnesota was God's country.

As this story broke, people began to wonder out loud if God was now so rich, why would God need any of their money, or time or talents?

What could they offer God, if God was now the proud owner of a cool 11 million. Well, it turns out the fine print on the letter stated that God was just a finalist, not an actual winner yet. And in order to be a winner God would need to stick the little sticker on the right box and mail it in, and be picked out a barrel from a million other finalists. And besides that God would need to prove US citizenship. That is the last we've heard of the story.

The powerful image of the widow coming forward to offer her only two coins has been often misused for many years in efforts to increase giving to the church. Here is the ideal giver, it's been said, or preached. If this woman could dig so deep and sacrifice so much, as Jesus notes, why can't the rest of us? She gave everything she had and so should we. Some like to note that she was a percentage giver - "100%" of what she had. Let's all do the same. There are some churches badger people into giving by saying "God is watching what you put in the plate so make it big, make it count, make it splashy" I am not going to say that this morning.

The story of the widow's mite has also been used by some as an example of bad stewardship and a

reason to not give to the church. Some people take delight in pointing out what a corrupt institution this must have been that would take the last coins from the poorest of the

done. This is the greatest gift for she has given out of her poverty. She is a devoted woman who was not afraid to give all she has to God. She has given her whole life because of her faith. And all this probably went on without her even knowing that she was being talked about.

The question I have, that is not answered in our text is what was the woman thinking and feeling as she did this? One of the most engaging things to do when reading scripture to make the stories come to life in your head, and fill in the parts that are not told. As this woman brings her gift, what was it like for her? I don't think she was pressured to make the gift.

I had always had a picture of a very old woman, walking with a shuffling step. Her back bent from years of hard work. In my mind, even though she had been through some hard times, her heart was filled with a sense of loving gratitude toward God. Her gift of two small copper coins was a sacrificial gift of a truly grateful heart. I imagine that she had not done this before. She did not do what she did in order to be recognized and rewarded for being faithful. She did it because she was full of faith and trust that she was

forever stuck to God. She was one who could say. I don't know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future. That was her strength, that was her true might, that she could let go. She gave her money away and said I don't know what is coming next, but that's OK. She was responding to a need to give from within her and this day it was to give it all away. Even though she did not know what happens next she trusted that she was going to be OK; she would make this gift and then see what comes. That's how I had often pictured it.

But one wonders is this something that she had done many times before? Was she accustomed to emptying her pockets as she left the temple, knowing that God would provide for her in the coming week? If so her act might be one of joyful confidence, she may have dropped her coins in saying, "here you go God. Thanks for everything, see you next week!" She knew what would come next. She may have found a way of living that God got everything but just the basics of what it took to live on.

One other way to look at the story is that was perhaps an almost radical act of faith, that she might have thrown the coins in saying, you have

to take care of me now God because here is everything I have. Who knows? We can only imagine what her thinking was.

I heard a story from Africa about a time when the offering plate went around a man took the plate and gently set it on the ground, and then he stood in it to show the depth of his conviction and his desire to give it all to God. I don't know how the ushers picked up the plate without hurting their backs. That image of standing in the offering plate in one that stuck with me.

Giving is an act of faith. We don't know what motivates another to give. We may not ever know what is clearly going on within ourselves as we live out our faith and make our commitments to God. Some may know the joy of God filling us up faster than we can give ourselves away. Some may feel like sacrificial giving is too much of a sacrifice. But we know that no matter what we bring before God, in loving transformation God uses whatever is brought, for good. If we put our whole selves in the plate, or even just a little bit, God will bless and use whatever is there.

Today begins the stewardship campaign for the church. We are in this together as a community and yet giving remains an individual discernment. It is a way of saying yes to God. That's really the point of our Christian giving. It is our way of saying yes God, we are yours. The significance of each of our gifts lies right there in that decision; it's what it means to you. Significance is not measured by purchasing power or size in relation to need; the meaning of gifts of money lies with giver and nowhere else. The meaning of the gift lies not in what it buys but in where it originated, how it relates to the heart and life and spirit of the giver. As we seek respond to God's love for us, we are led to give. With trust, and faith and courage that God will take and bless whatever and offer and make a difference with it. When we give, may we give with a sense of hope and expectation at what God will do next. Let us celebrate the gifts we have and let us give with all our might. Amen.