

A Story of Two Widows

*This sermon was preached by the Rev. Stephen W. DeGweck on November 8, 2009
and is based on Mark 12:38-44.*

I don't know how many times I've heard someone say, "you know, we were poor growing up, but we never knew it. We never went hungry, and there was lots of love at home, and we never felt deprived. We always felt like we had enough." That's a very wholesome attitude toward life, don't you think? Sadly, it's one which, as I look around in these latter years of the 20th century, seems virtually to have disappeared from the landscape, at least in this country, and I suspect, in much of the wealthy, industrialized west. In this age of instant communication, split-second analysis, and immediate gratification, I suspect we have largely lost the ability to be content. And it's not altogether our fault, although I guess it is, since on the one hand we're shaped by the forces of our society, but then who is "society" but us? How does a modern, consumer oriented society move forward, grow, progress? By convincing us that "enough" is never quite enough! It's normal to want more. No one could possibly grow up poor in this day and age and "not know it," to quote our imaginary friend. Every TV set, every magazine ad, every billboard, tells you what you ought to have, or, if you happen to be poor, reminds you what you don't have, which is what everybody else seems to have. The whole culture is a conspiracy, it seems, to draw us toward wanting more, wanting bigger, wanting better. Away with "wanting"--you need this or that. You're entitled. We have elevated economic prosperity to a virtual right, and emphasized to the have-nots that if you don't have what you want, there's something wrong with you, or worse, someone's keeping you from what you deserve. And let's not ring our hands by thinking that some giant conspiracy has gotten us by the collar--we've created this consumer society. It gives us what we want, and so we have little choice to play ball with the attitudes and values which sustain it. I complained once to a businessman about the greed infecting the hordes of holiday shoppers I saw everywhere. "Reverend," he said, "if it wasn't for that greed, the whole economy would collapse, and we'd all be the worse off. So don't knock it." He may be right

in one sense. But I still think we're the poorer these days, in a world where folks seem to know the price of everything, and the value of nothing. Where else but America does each generation feel they have the right to live better than their parents?

And I sketch out a picture of our materialistic preoccupations in order to show you the contrast to Jesus's little off-the-cuff remark to the disciples as they stood day-dreaming outside the temple. Jesus has just been teaching and disputing, and seems to be just resting, or "chillin," as my kids would say. Jesus is watching the folks come and go from the temple, bringing their offerings of money. The text says that many rich people tossed in large offerings. Maybe Jesus's mind is wandering. But suddenly, he spots a woman alone, who tosses two small copper coins, two pennies, into the receptacle. Her clothing probably reveals her poverty. And since she is described as a mature woman, the fact that she's alone indicates she is most likely a widow, for otherwise she would be accompanied by her husband. And Jesus says, come here, guys, look at this. If the disciples have noticed anything at all, they've probably been oohing and aahing over the bags of money the rich folks have been tossing into one of the 13 trumpet-shaped receptacles used by the worshipers for offerings. And Jesus, as he so often does, tells his men something they don't expect to hear, and maybe don't understand. He says, "did you see those two little pennies that poor woman put into the treasury? I tell you, they are worth more than all the sacks of gold you guys have been drooling at! Those other folks gave a slice of their affluence. They still went home to caviar and champagne. This lady gave God all she had. There is no response recorded from the disciples. Then again, it's probably hard to speak with your mouths hanging open.

"More than the others?" Peter and John may have mumbled. "What on earth is he talking about?" Of course, he means that the monetary value of what we give to God is entirely immaterial--doesn't matter! You can't "buy God off" or impress him with money, even if it does end up in the plate. The issue, as Jesus frames it squarely for his disciples, is what that money represents. Five dollars in the offering plate is pocket change to a successful business executive. It may be a

generous offering to a poor disabled veteran on a pension. No, you can't buy God off with greenbacks. But is there any sacrifice to our giving? And if not, then why not? Most stewardship sermons I've heard assume folks are stingy and selfish, and have to be browbeaten into giving more generously to support the work of the church--God's work! And yet for the most part, in my experience, the church folks I've hung out with are pretty generous sorts. But lots and lots of folks who have heard all the guilt-inducing sermons about giving, who have more than adequate means to give generously, still toss that buck in the plate, then spend more than that on the way home, for a newspaper and a quart of milk. Why? The little widow at the temple tells us why, and the answer may surprise you. I've called this sermon, "A Story of Two Widows." You've met the one; let me illustrate by telling you about the second. Every time I hear this text about the widow who gave all she had, I see a face, and remember a story.

Her name was Hilda. She was a member of a church I served long ago as a seminary student, doing a year of full time fieldwork. This was back when I had just enough enthusiasm to be dangerous, and not enough sense yet to recognize a saint when I saw one. Hilda lived in a third-floor walk-up apartment in an old Victorian house, about six blocks from the church I served for a year in the little town of Racine, Wisconsin. She'd been a widow for years, had a married daughter who neglected her, and survived, as nearly as I could tell, on a small Social Security check. I spent many a gray, blustery Wisconsin afternoon sitting in her tiny little living room, drinking coffee. She was one of our "shut-ins", a pastor's term for one who has limited mobility. Hilda had no car. Her daughter took her food shopping. She walked the six blocks to church, summer and winter. She was everybody's friend, and had a kind and encouraging word for young and old. I never once heard even a trace of self-pity in anything she said. Other shut-ins got their regular once-a-month visit from the young seminarian. My stops at Hilda's were considerably more frequent. But here's the story.

This was back in the early 70's, and churches were becoming more sensitive to feeding the hungry and responding to the needs of the poor. The energetic young seminary intern (that would be me) had noticed that people like Hilda seemed to

live on the edge of poverty, and in my wisdom I decided that a food pantry would be a good way of ministering to folks in need. I remember the day I told Hilda about it during one of my visits. I told her that I was concerned about folks who needed help, and proudly said that now, folks in our community would be able to get temporary help from our church when things got rough, or when there were too many days left, at the end of the check. I never specifically invited her to make use of the new food pantry, but felt sure she'd gotten the message. A few Sunday mornings later, as I set up the tables in the church narthex to receive the donations of canned goods from the congregation, in the door came Hilda--carrying a full grocery bag which she'd lugged all the way from her house--"for the needy," she said. And after my initial shock wore off, I explained with all the wisdom any 24 year-old male can muster that this program was for folks like her, and the last thing I wanted was for her to strain her already-overloaded budget giving away food she couldn't afford to begin with, to others no more needy than she was. And she looked up at me genuinely puzzled, and said, "oh, but I'm OK. I get by." And then she smiled and said, "God takes care of me." And every second Sunday of the month from then on, in came Hilda, with food for the "needy."

"God takes care of me." That's the real barrier to generous giving, isn't it? Not generosity, and surely not wealth. Any pastor knows the best givers in any parish are not necessarily the wealthiest. When I consider my obligation to offer the first fruits of my labors to God, when I sit down and write that check--I don't stop and think, "Does God really deserve this?" I wonder, "If I put in this much or that much, will I have enough to get through the next few weeks, next pay period, next whatever?" Will God take care of me? Will God see to my needs, my family's needs? The poor widow at the temple is being praised, not for the amount of money she puts in, and not for being crazy or irresponsible in giving her money away foolishly. No indeed. She trusts God to take care of her. Over and over and over, that's the theme of Jesus's teaching. Consider the lilies of the field, or the birds of the air. God knows their needs. God takes care of them. Whoever would enter the Kingdom of heaven must become as a little child. What does a little child do? He trusts parents to take care of him. I may have worried a time or two back in the day how food was going to make it to the table, but my kids never did. They

trusted me to come through for them.

And that's what stewardship is really all about, at its base. Do I trust God enough to give generously of the things I have, do I wonder if I take the biblical standard of giving, which is the tithe, if I take that seriously, will I go broke, or lose my house, or have enough for my own needs? I love what Bishop Stough used to say about giving. "Imagine what a wonderful God we have," he would say. "He gives us all this abundance, and even lets us keep 90% of it." Stewardship begins with being so grateful to God that I'm willing to give my all for him, when the truth of the old Prayer Book offertory sentence finally pierces my stingy hide: all things come of thee, o Lord, and from thine own have we given thee. But the barrier to good stewardship is far more complex than simple generosity. It's in that widow, giving to God everything she had to give, leaving the temple not sure, perhaps, how she was going to make ends meet, but trusting that God knew all about it. It's in that image that will never leave my mind, that picture of little Hilda struggling in that church door with that bag of groceries, my own modern day "widow at the temple," wondering why this poor silly young man was upset with her, and saying with absolute trust, "God will take care of me." And he did. She died a few years after I left, and the Christmas cards were cheery to the end, from a lady who seemed to have little to be cheery about, at least by the world's standards. We will not learn to be good stewards when we finally have enough money that we can give generously, or when we finally have enough time that we can be generous with it. None of that has anything to do with stewardship. We will be good stewards when we are willing, like both of my poor widows, to trust that God will take care of us, and to live as if we really do believe it. And perhaps when we do, we will discover that these poor widows were very rich indeed. Amen.