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Abington Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 127

Mark 12:38-44

PRAISE OR LAMENT?

Their generosity toward us was amazing, but it left us a bit uncomfortable. We as guests were eating and our hosts were not, because there was not enough food for all who were there to have a full meal. The church leaders who set up our itinerary in El Salvador, who included this daytrip to a small impoverished village of campesinos, told us we needed to eat the meal graciously offered, that we definitely should not try to give it back or to share it with those who were hosting us, as that would have been perceived as a slight to their expression of hospitality. We were a few hours away from the capital city, the last part of our trip having been on dirt roads. As we came into the village, we saw no other motorized vehicles anywhere around. We did see a woman carrying a tub full of dishes on her head. We would later find out that she had gone to quite a number of neighbors borrowing those dishes so that there would be enough plates, cups, and forks for these church guests visiting from the United States. The meal was good and there was plenty for us as guests to eat. But it was an expression of generosity that made me feel quite uncomfortable.

I have a similar level of discomfort with our bible story today about the generosity of a poor widow giving to the temple treasury. It was the week of Passover, so many were coming with their offerings. Some were seen to be putting in large amounts. But Jesus, as he was watching, took notice of a poor widow, who donated using the two smallest coins there were. Jesus described her as giving all she had, all she had to live on, saying she comparably gave more than those who had put in large amounts because they had given out of their abundance, while she had given all that she had. That sounds like he is praising the woman. But do you join me in being somewhat uncomfortable with leaving it at that? Earlier in our reading, we heard of Jesus' warning against the scribes who he said liked to parade their religious piety even while quietly undermining the well-being of the most

vulnerable widows, maneuvering the legalities of the transfer of property with a result that left some widows destitute. Jesus knew the Hebrew scriptures that clearly commanded that widows and other vulnerable people be cared for. Is this a story about Jesus shining the light on an expression of dedication and faithfulness or an account of a lamentable reality of a religious institution that had lost its way?

Let's look first at the woman's generosity. With Thanksgiving now just eleven days away, the possibility of gratitude as the reason she gave what she did came to my mind. Is this a story to delve into how God provides, even for those who have so little, and to see an example of deep trust and faith? Perhaps the woman gave what she did because she had deep commitment to providing for the needs of the temple as that wonderful place where people worship as a way to get into right relationship with God.

Is that what led to such generosity? Yet, one would think if Mark wanted that to be the point of this story, there would be additional information about the woman. But not one further detail is mentioned about her here or elsewhere. We don't know what happened to her earlier that day that led to her gift or what may have happened to her after she gave the last coins in her possession. We are not told anything she said or felt or even about the expression on her face when she dropped in the two coins. From what Jesus says and from the way Mark describes the scene, there are no indications as to the woman's motivation for her extraordinary act.

We can't even be certain of Jesus' tone of voice as he describes to his disciples what the woman has done. If only Mark had given us the hint that Jesus spoke of the woman with great admiration. The traditional interpretation of this passage has assumed such a tone, but such a description of it is not there. What if Jesus had a different tone of voice when he spoke of her act? What if it was in sadness that he pointed out that generosity in spite of the story that she had so little because of the fees the scribes charged to administer the meager assets of widows, the fees having had a higher priority to be paid than were the needs of the women, themselves. Mark does not tell us that he used that tone of voice, but we know stories of Jesus caring deeply when widows did not have what they needed.

How do you think Jesus would react to the following situation? A famous television preacher who lives in luxury convinces a poor widow to give the last money in her name to bolster what funds his extravagance. Do you think Jesus would want to congratulate the woman for her generous gift or would he be unhappy about a system that led to the woman giving her last resources for what would be spent on something lavish?

Ah, but in Mark, what we are talking about is the temple here. Wasn't there lasting value in the very place where people would experience the grace of God? However, that's just the point – the people who oversaw the temple had lost their sense of purpose. The way they ran it left little prospect for an encounter with grace. Just after our reading, when Jesus and his disciples are leaving the temple, one of his disciples remarks about how impressive the structure is. But Jesus responds saying that it would all be destroyed, and indeed the temple was destroyed by the Romans about the time Mark wrote his gospel account.

While generosity can be praised, there are lamentable situations which lead to unmet needs. This story is about giving, but there is indication that it is appropriate for us to give up certain things before we give. While we aren't told of the widow's motives for her action, we are told of the motives of the temple officials for theirs. The first thing to be given up is anything that is used to bolster the appearance of religious authority in an attempt to hide that the ministry lacks devotion to the core values of the faith. The ministry of the temple at that time had devolved into a shallow religiosity that was disconnected from its purpose. It was more show than substance because the needs of the poor were not only being ignored, they were being made worse by the practices of the temple officials. The scribes tried to hide their misplaced values with fancy robes (I hope this one isn't too fancy). They put on a show with long prayers (you'll notice later on that I asked Diane to lead our prayers today). Before we give, it is a good thing to ask whether this religious institution called Abington Presbyterian Church is fulfilling its God-given purpose. Are we proclaiming the gospel in word and deed to the diverse community of which we are a part? Are we seeking to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ? Are we reflecting the compassionate love of the One who gives us all that we have?

A second thing to be given up is the typical understanding of what makes for a large gift. Giving of ourselves is a central part of our response to God's great giving. As Jesus is watching people offer their gifts to the temple ministry, he sees some wealthy people who were putting in large sums of money. But he measures the size of the gift not in amount, but in comparison with what one has. Jesus does not encourage his followers to seek out praise for acts of generosity, but he redefines them and celebrates them.

One more thing to be given up as we look at this story is the attempt to find what motivated the poor widow to give her all at the temple that day. The clues just are not there. What is more important is that we take a hard look at whatever our own motives are for giving or for other ways in which we seek to live out our faith. Are our motives based in a desire to serve God? Do they take into account a deep sense of gratitude? Do they reflect a yearning to be a more generous person and to meet charitable needs as well as to meet the needs for just structures in our society and in our world? We can stop focusing on others' motivations in order to evaluate and reshape our own.

If we give up our shallow religiosity, if we give up inadequate definitions of generosity, and if we give up the search for someone else's motivation so that we find our own, then our giving can move us closer to being one of the things that puts us in right relationship with God and neighbor. There is One who places in our care all that we have and are. As we get rid of our lamentable practices and attitudes, then our giving can be a true expression of our praise of God, and new integrity and joy can accompany our devotion. Thanks be to God. Amen.