Today we come to the story of a poor widow.

38 As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! 40 They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 43 Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 44 For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

*We preachers love to use the widow to raise money for the church! “Put it all in the plate! The Word of the Lord!!” I wish I could do that, but that’s not what this is about.

The widow shows up during the week of Passover just days before Jesus’ crucifixion. He has been building a following for the past three years. The religious authorities want to eliminate him. The tension is at an all-time high.

Everything Jesus has done aggravates the situation. He has turned over the tables of the money-changers in the temple. They tested him on whether he supported paying taxes to Rome. They quizzed him on Jewish law, and he has made more than one derogatory statement about pretentious religion. In the middle of all that we meet this widow.

We don’t know her name, or how old she is. We know nothing about her, except that Jesus saw her do something incredible!

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It’s interesting that he actually sat down just to watch people give. Can you imagine Jesus sitting next to you as you fill out your pledge card? That would up your pledge! I’d want to turn and say, “This enough? We good?” It would be a daunting thing to write a check in front of Jesus! But in a sense, that’s what we all do.

Money is a very private matter in our culture. It’s easier to talk about sex, politics (Ok, maybe not politics), or religion, than it is to talk about our money. What we make and how much we are worth is a very private thing.

But the story of this poor widow is very public. She is right out there giving in public. This happens outside the temple in the women’s courtyard where there were thirteen containers, all for different purposes. Somehow Jesus knows what she gives. Two prutas, or small copper coins, the smallest coin in the currency, equivalent of a penny.

Apparently, Jesus was not looking for amounts. He was looking for something else. He contrasts her with the rich who offered large sums and proclaims that she has put in more than all of them combined. By percentage, she has given it all.

* I’ve seen this widow several times in my ministry. There was a woman named Lyla Pennington in my very first church. She actually was a widow with a mentally challenged adult son living with her in a very modest mobile home. She drove an old faded blue Ford Maverick with torn seats and balding tires. She did alterations for a meager living.

When the denomination was raising money for the national ministers’ pension fund, everyone felt that Lyla had given too much. It was a sacrificial pledge.

I went to talk with her in hopes she would reduce it. (Don’t get any ideas! I don’t do that very often!) How could a woman like this possibly give of her meager means so that ministers, Christian Educators, and missionaries would have a better retirement and she have none? The actual amount of her gift was relatively small, but the sacrifice of it was enormous.

The real question was why there wasn’t a fund at our church to help people like Lyla with their medical bills or emergencies. We could have done that. Why didn’t we have micro-financing, or no-interest loans to help people like her with their small businesses?
But when I talked to Lyla she very humbly said, “You are kind to think of me, but I am glad to be able to do what little bit I can for those who give their lives in service to Christ.” I had met the widow!

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But most of us are not Lila Pennington, or the widow. Who would you say you are in the story? I’d like to think I would be one of the disciples whom Jesus is teaching about this, but I could also be one of the rich who put in large sums from my abundance.

The Bible has some tough things to say to the rich.

- *Those who trust in their riches will wither, but the righteous will flourish like green leaves.* (Proverbs 11:28)
- “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 19:23)
- “He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.” (Luke 1:53)
- But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. (1Timothy 6:9)
- The rich will disappear like a flower in the field. (James 1:10b)
- “For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.” (Rev. 3:17)

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What do people like us do with all of that? Henri Nouwen writes, “The rich are also poor.” (A Spirituality of Fundraising, p. 41.) What does he mean by that? Is there a spiritual impoverishment within those of us who are rich? Have we “gained the world but lost our soul?” (Matt. 16:26) Is there any place for those who are rich in the kingdom of God? People like us need to know.

Because the Bible warns us of the dangers of wealth does not mean God does not love the rich. I’ve said some harsh things to my kids, because I love them. (And sometimes just because they deserved it!) Why give someone a warning if you don’t care about them? Why waste your time?
I think Jesus’ target was the rich. He wants them to have what she has, a heart for God. He teaches his disciples this so they can teach others. Why go to all this trouble unless he loved them?

* 

But this is not a formula. It would make no sense to ask everyone to give away everything they have. The whole world would be poor. How would we eat? Who would pay for health care and education? Companies would collapse. Transportation, national defense, agriculture, homes, hospitals, the stock market and everything else would crash if all of us gave everything we have to the temple, or to the church.

He’s not pointing to her because she is a formula. He’s pointing to her because she is faithful. There’s something about the humility of it. She has no power, no clout. Nothing particularly special about her, except that we are still taking about her over 2,000 years later! There’s something here he wants us to see. It can’t be two prutas. I think he wants us to see this because she put her life in that offering plate. That’s what he wants us to see.

* 

You ever thought of this? She’s not even a Christian, she’s Jewish. She’s not his disciple. Doesn’t belong to a church. She gets no tax break. She does what she does in response to God’s grace.

This isn’t about the money. Stewardship is not about the money. It’s about the heart. That’s what the whole Bible is about. The heart. Who, or to what does your heart belong? Answer that question and the rest falls into place.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Congregation: Amen