

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA
The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge
Church Year B
Date: 11/8/15
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Mark 12: 38-44

“All she had to live on.” That’s right. There’s no getting around it. Not a percentage. Not a tithe. Everything. Her whole life. That’s what we hear Jesus holding up to his disciples this morning as an example. It seems this widow’s two small coins were worth more than the big money that others were putting into the Temple treasury. They weren’t putting in everything. She was.

I can’t begin to imagine how many thousands of stewardship sermons have been preached on this text. You’ve heard them, I’ll bet more than once, also have I. I’ve preached them! But you know what? In reflecting on this text over these last few days, I’ve realized that most of those stewardship sermons, including the ones I’ve preached on this text, have missed the point. As soon as we try to analogize the widow giving all that she had to the Temple, of our giving to the Church, we’ve missed the point. Because inevitably we say something like, “Well, if she gave everything, I guess I ought to give just a little bit more.” And so when the widow gets used as simply an example of faithful giving, an example, by the way, we’ll never live up to – it becomes easy to ignore what’s really going on here. If we think of our stewardship as being primarily about giving our money – whether to the church or other worthy organizations – our focus is too narrow. In fact, we fundamentally misunderstand who we are and who God is calling us to be. Because a steward isn’t an owner. A steward is a manager. That’s the literal meaning of steward. Manager. A manager acting on behalf of an owner. And the owner of course is God. God from whom all blessings flow. The owner of all that was or is or is to come, is not me. The resources of my household aren’t mine in any permanent sense. They are just passing through.

I’ll be 64 next month – which seems hard to believe since I was 35 just about a minute ago – and as I continue this inexorable journey through life towards the closing hymn, if you know what I mean, I realize more and more the truth that I don’t own anything in any permanent sense of that term. I’ll leave the stage the same way I entered. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. It’s all passing away as Paul observed to the Corinthians.

So when Zonnie and I sat down a couple of weeks ago to complete our pledge card, an interesting conversation ensued. Almost reflexively, the question we began with was, “Well, how much shall we pledge this year?” And that led to an examination of our household budget and a review of our giving last year which finally led to a conversation

about our priorities. It turns out that there are a couple of small leaks in our little household boat. And so this conversation about priorities was a really important better steward of all my life. I want to be a better steward of me. Well, that convicted me. Exactly. I want to be a better steward of my whole life too. I want to be a better steward of me.

And so the question, "How much shall we give to St. Thomas this year?" is really the wrong question. That's a question an owner would ask, not a steward. If you've given all your money to a financial advisor to manage, wouldn't you be surprised if he said, "I'm going to manage 20% or 5% or 10% of this for you and keep the rest for myself." I'd be out of that office pretty quick. No, you would expect your advisor to manage all of your resources in your interest. So it is with God. I didn't hear Jesus say, "Love God with all your heart, mind, and strength, and with 2% of your income." Not at all. That's an owner's way of looking at things. An owner chooses to give or not.

But the truth is that we are managers, we are only here for a little while, and the only question is whether we manage in the interest of God, the owner, well or poorly. In fact, I would go so far as to say that this is the ultimate question in our lives. How have we managed this gift from God, namely our very lives? Well or poorly? What kind of steward of my life am I? It's an accounting I have to give every day. And I really do believe that one day it is an accounting I will make with the real owner of my life, the one whom I'm called to love with **all** my heart, mind and strength. Now I don't dread that accounting because I know that the owner of my life is both just and merciful. But I tell you what. I sure do want to get it right.

And that's where this story of the widow's two coins comes in. The widow offered all that she had and all that she was. 100%. We are called to manage all our assets in the interest of God – spiritual, emotional, physical, intellectual, professional, and yes, financial, in the interest of God. 100%.

It's way beyond the annual four weeks begathon in the Fall. It's about growing and strengthening this life-giving and life-changing community we are all blessed to be part of. We aren't isolated individuals living in our own little castles, rationing out our selves and our resources. We are a Christian community, a group of people bound together with a common vision of living in joyful hope of the Resurrection. That resurrected life in Christ is best experienced here and now – in community. In **this** community.

And this is why our Vestry is asking us as a community to move into a new way of living. The shorthand name for this is year-round stewardship. We want to be good stewards of our whole lives – all the time. Being faithful managers of all that God has

blessed us with – I’m talking about life and love and family and friends and community and calling – is really life-changing. It’s transformative. Engagement. Abundance. Gratitude. Those are the watchwords of our new stewardship adventure.

Imagine that Jesus has just told you the story of the widow who put in all that she had. And now he turns to you and says, “What will you put in?” “What will I put in?” If my answer isn’t “Everything,” well I have some work to do loving and serving with all my heart, mind, and strength. Being a faithful manager, a committed manager of the gifts of life and love. Living that out in this community of followers of Jesus.

And one tangible, concrete sign of my commitment to be a faithful manager is this Pledge card, this Commitment card. It’s a sign of my commitment and your commitment to being a follower of Jesus. And that’s why it’s really important to **you** to complete this card. This card tells you that **you are committed** to following Jesus. It’s just a different feeling than simply making a contribution in the offering plate on those Sundays you come to church. It’s the satisfaction of being truly committed.

And your pledge allows the Vestry and staff to be responsible stewards of this community. Yes, there are bills to pay so that we can maintain this beautiful sanctuary and our beautiful new Life Center. And you have called what I believe is truly a remarkable staff to serve you and this community. I hope you will find the staff worthy of your support. They are committed to you, that’s for sure. The pledge card is a sign of gratitude for this very special Christian community. And that’s important. The gratitude and commitment reflected in your Commitment card allow your vestry and staff to be good stewards themselves.

One day we will all be called to make an accounting. In fact, we’re really called to account every day. And I truly believe that this accounting isn’t about numbers. It’s about commitment. It’s about faith. It’s about surrender. How have I used the ultimate resource – my very life – that has been entrusted to me? Have I used it purposefully in love and service? Or have I used it selfishly to gratify my ego and my desires? I struggle to answer that accounting every day. Some days I do better than others. But I do believe that it’s the struggle itself that counts. It’s the commitment that counts. It’s the pledge of my whole life to the owner of my life 100%. Amen.