

“Yes, we give, And God knows the story of our giving”

Final Sermon in the Five-week Series: “Yes, And...Storytelling + Listening”

Yes, your story is important...and you can learn from everyone’s story.

Mark 12:41-44 (NRSV)

“You make a living by what you get; you make a life by what you give.”

This quote is attributed to Winston Churchill, but that’s disputed by some. In any case, we all know the difference between getting and giving...but – what’s the difference between *a living* and *a life*?

It seems to me that we do a good job of telling the story of our *living* while we are alive. And other people we do a good job of telling the story of our *life* after we die.

What do I mean by all this? Well, if we take the quote at face value, it suggests that how we make money or how we get stuff is our “living.” We are very good about asking people this part of their story. We ask our kids, “*What do you want to do when you grow up?*” As adults when we meet someone new or need small talk we

inquire, “*What do you do for a living?*”

The implication in these questions is that what someone does for their job is their living, and presumably they make money for it. Perhaps this is where the word “just” comes into play when a mother or father answers, “*Oh, I’m just a stay-at-home mom (or dad.)*” Just. As if that’s not a real job because it doesn’t earn a wage. Raising kids, keeping the home...these things are invaluable. And yet we place value on them (or rather devalue them) every time we use the qualifier “just.” The same holds true for other jobs...ones that do not require a college education or that do not make a lot of money. “*I’m just a busboy. Just a barista. Just a secretary. Just a student. I just work in retail. Just work at the gym. Just work at the mall.*” Just.

You don't tend to hear people say, "I'm just a doctor, just a lawyer, just an engineer, just a professor, just a CEO, etc." Somehow those careers, those 'livings' can stand on their own without the word "just" as a qualifier.

This suggests to me that how we as a society understand someone's *living* is intrinsically tied to what they do to earn money, if they earn money at all. We care a lot about this while we are alive. Which is why retirement can be such a hard transition for folks, not working to earn money can strip away a huge part of someone's identity, especially if their career has defined them more than anything else in their life.

In contrast to how we make money, what we believe in and what we value and then how we live out those beliefs and values is what the quote means by the word *life*. "We make a life by what we give." We tend to do an excellent job of naming all the ways someone lived their life well once they've died. We celebrate not just the job they had, but the life they had and the many roles they had in all chapters of their life... father, son, brother, uncle, friend,

veteran, deacon, volunteer, etc. All of those identities are not about getting money, but about giving something away – whether that's love or time or sacrifice.

The thing is, both our *living* and our *lives* are important to our identities, our stories. What we do for a living certainly informs our story. And how we live our life, how we live out our core values and beliefs – that is the very heart of our story.

Jesus invites us into a life with him. Not a living. We're not going to make money following Jesus. But as we live a life of loving others and loving God we will make meaning...and we'll make a difference in lives beyond our own. To follow Jesus is to give. Because giving is inherently a part of paying attention to other people and caring for them. Being community together requires giving. Giving something of ourselves away – be it money, time, love, or sacrifice. No where in Scripture does Jesus say, "Come make a living by following me." (He invites the disciples to 'fish' for people after all, not 'fish'...that's not very lucrative!) Rather, Jesus says, "Come follow me." "And

I have come so that you may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10b).

Well, if abundance isn't about money, what is it about?

In today's text we get a snapshot of one moment in the Temple. There are details before this snapshot and after it that help inform what we see in it. But let's start with just what we see in these four verses. Let's allow these four verses to be the “frame” around this snapshot.

The first thing we notice is that Jesus is watching. Noticing. Looking at people as they put money into the treasury. Whatever they are giving to the Temple is no private matter. It's a public display. As Jesus is watching, our assumption might be that he is watching *what* people put into the treasury because he cares about the amount. But I wonder if that's true. Maybe he's watching the people, not to see what they put in, but to see *who* they are. In all honesty, it would be hard to see exactly how much any of them put in from a ways away. They don't have confidential giving envelopes like we do. Coins clanging are coins clanging! And if you cup your hand the

right way as you drop your coins in the treasury, no one would be able to see just what kind of coins you were dropping in...be they pennies or silver dollars.

So Jesus is good ole-fashion people-watching. First he sees rich people putting in large sums. Mark only uses one descriptor here: rich. That word would suggest something about what these people do for a living. They do something that affords them the opportunity to make a good amount of money. Just looking at these four verses, we really do not know anything else about these people except that they are rich.

Then Jesus sees *someone*. A specific someone. Before, the language Jesus was watching the “crowd” and “many rich people”...but now he hones in. He sees one person. The way the story is told, it seems that we are to remember this person by what went into the treasury – two coins. But before we even get to what this person put in the treasury, Jesus identifies this person. She is a poor widow. Anonymous in name, but not in story. You see, Mark could have just said a poor woman put two small copper coins in

the treasury. Saying “poor woman” would have been enough to contrast her with the “many rich people.” But Mark says “poor widow.”

And in noting this, Jesus is seeing a larger picture than just the one before him of a woman putting two coins into the offering plate. Jesus is seeing the *story* of this woman’s life: what happened before this moment and what happened after. At some point before this moment, this woman had lost her husband. Part of her story is grief. And because she put in “all she had to live on” Jesus can see what will come after this moment – more poverty, more begging, perhaps even death if she literally has nothing left to eat or drink.

The reality is the woman at the temple was not a *poor* widow; she was poor *because* she was a widow. In Jesus’ day, by and large, women were totally dependent on their male relatives for their livelihood. To be widowed meant not only losing someone you loved, but more tragically, it also meant that you were losing the one on whom you were totally

dependent. And widows were forced to live off of the good graces of other people, supposedly the good graces of the leaders in the temple who took their money in the first place.¹ (We’ll come back to that in a minute.)

Whereas others would have just heard the clink of juts two coins and seen a nobody, Jesus hears the two coins and sees a somebody. A somebody who has lost so much and yet who still shows up...still gives...still does her part for the community and the greater good. In just her giving, Jesus knows something of her heart, her life, her dependence, her trust. And that is what is of value to him. It’s not about the money, it’s about her motive.

So yes the money that we give is important. And Jesus sees more than the money that we give. Even more *how* he sees the amount we give is not based on the numbers, it’s based on what that number tells him about our heart, our faith, our priorities. He sees the story behind our money, which is where the “story of our life” – of our giving – has its meaning.

¹ Mary W. Anderson is pastor of St. Paul’s Lutheran Church in Evanston, IL. This article appeared in *The Christian Century*, November 1, 2003, p. 18. Accessed

on 7 Nov. 2009 at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2907>.

However one makes their living may dictate how much money that they have. However, how one lives their life, has nothing to do with how much money they make, but how much they live on for themselves and how much they share with others, how much they give away.

Jesus notes: *“This poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 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,”* (Mark 12:43-44). The Greek word used here is *bios*. Which means that she literally gave the very root of her biology and life...herself...all she had to live on *and* all of her that was living.

We normally read this as praise, but Jesus could be lamenting this fact. Because he knows the story of this woman, this widow. He knows that she will not return home to a husband who will provide for her, but rather, more likely, she'll return home to her hungry children, whose mouths she cannot feed. And nobody in that moment, none of the rich people putting in large sums, saw what the woman did and

pulled her aside and said, *“Thank you so much for your generosity. May I offer you this (money, food, whatever) to take home to your family?”* In other words, the Temple, that was supposed to be watching after “widows and the orphans,” had forgotten its mission, forgotten the story of the God it was to be proclaiming. Everybody’s story was not heard. The elite in the Temple had neglected to hear the stories of the widows.

So now we’re going to step outside of our four verse frame to get a bigger picture, a fuller story. Just two verses before this passage Jesus says, *“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! **They devour widows’ houses** and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation,”* (v38-40).

Unlike Luke’s Gospel, Mark’s gospel doesn’t talk about widows a lot. He clearly wants readers to see a connection between this statement of Jesus’ about the scribes “devouring widows’ houses” in

verse 40 and the widow in verse 42. In his whole gospel, Mark only used the term “widow” (*chera*) only in these two stories (cf. 12:40, 42, 43).² That’s it! There is a clear connection.

To Jesus, this woman’s story matters. The fact that she is a widow matters. Her grief matters just as much as her giving. In fact, her grief informs her giving. She has learned that you cannot depend on the things or people of this world to uphold you...you have to depend on God...and to her, depending on God meant supporting God’s house. The core values of her life are quite clear. In all honesty, she probably shouldn’t be giving to the Temple given her situation and what is going on in the Temple at this time. (The widows are not being cared for!) However, what she should or shouldn’t do is not our judgement to make. She does what she does. She gives. And Jesus sees her gift as generosity.

We don’t know a lot about the widow’s story. I wish we knew more. I wish we knew her

name, her history, her hopes, her dreams. I wish we knew more about this widow, and I’m grateful for what we do know about her through her giving. You see, everything we do and say reveals something about our story, including our giving!

The reason Jesus says the widow gives “more” than the scribes (the rich people) is because Jesus knows the story of the scribes too...he knows they are not caring for the widows and orphans as they should be. Their actions, their lives, their living do not inform their giving. In this case, Jesus sees the rich people’s giving as a token of obligation more than a generous act of the heart.

And, Jesus doesn’t say they shouldn’t give what they’re giving. He just knows their gifts have intrinsically different worth because their giving is not transforming their lives – spiritually speaking. It’s not costing them a thing. And with Jesus, when it comes to following him with our whole lives – it will *always* cost us. Sacrifice is part of our Christian story. Not sacrifice for the case of ego or

² Emerson Powery, “Commentary on Mark 12:38-44,” *Working Preacher* (8 Nov. 2015), accessed on Nov. 18, 2018 at

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2662.

bragging's sake, but sacrifice for the sake of leading to new life and new hope. Sacrifice that leads to a different ending for all of our stories – one of redemption and grace and new life.

In a moment we will be processing to the front to give to God our financial commitments for Calvary. We will be giving to God and to this community. What you wrote on your commitment card will not be seen by all of us. Today we do not what's written on your card. We see you. We see your story. And so does God.

When you come forward today to commit financially to this community, know that we are committing to you as well, and to the call of Jesus that we have to care for you. We see you. We see the year you have had – your grief over losing a loved one, your months of unemployment, your celebration of a new job, your engagement, your knee replacement or hip replacement (or any joint replacement), your volunteer hours with Family Promise, with Council, with choir, with our children, with the Foot of the Cross Courtyard, with the youth, with

ABW, with missions, with the library, with *The Gathering*, with Bootstraps, with the office, with those who are sick and in the hospital, homebound and lonely. We see you. Your travel – to fun far off places on cruises, to places where you serve on mission, to see family who are dying, grandkids who are graduating. We see your daily struggles – the hectic schedule at work, with the kids' crazy school schedules and activities, with caring for your own parents, living with chronic illness, and perhaps just trying to make a little bit of time for yourself. We see your hobbies, your quirks, your joys. We see your sorrows, celebrations, and imperfections.

We see you, because *God sees you*. And we are called to have the vision of Christ, the gaze of God's love, even though we will fail at fully seeing you, time and time again, we'll keep trying. None of us knows your full story. But we want to know it. We want to know the story behind whatever it is that you are giving today. What makes you give to Calvary? You don't have to...yet you are. You didn't have to show up today and yet you did. Why? What's that about?

Of course, the flip side of this is that we can only know your story if you share it with us. Jesus knew the widow's story because it was near impossible to hide that kind of status in her community. And sometimes we know parts of one another's stories because they are announced on the prayer list or because we hear you say something in Sunday school. But the only way we can truly know what is going on in your life and *who* you are and what you care about and value – is if you share it with us. Sharing about your life, your story, takes trust. Perhaps even more trust than giving financially to the church. Know we are here when you are ready to share. I am here. The people around you are here. We see you and we want to hear the even fuller story of your life because God sees you and cares about your story. Some of us may know what you do for a *living*, but do we know what gives you *life*? What brings you joy? What compels you to give?

Why does this matter? Because all of our stories make up the collective story of Calvary. And we can only proclaim and live out the parts of our story that we know. The fullness of how God is at work in the

world through Calvary is only revealed when the fullness of *how* God is at work in each of our lives is known!

And God cares about the story that our giving tells. How does our giving reflect not just a percentage of how we make our living...but the whole of how we live our days?

When we give in such a way that we depend on God and on others – and do not solely depend upon ourselves – then we start to understand what being a community of Christ is all about. We need each other. And every gift – no matter how big or small – is significant to the ministry of this church...to the story of our lives and *your* life.

There is a timelessness about the widow's offering because no matter how good or bad the economy is...no matter what currency we use or don't use...no matter what amount we equate those two "mites" with today – it doesn't matter...because it was the heart of the widow's giving that quickens our hearts today...and hopefully convicts our hearts as well.

Co-founder of the Network for

Grateful Living, Catholic
Brother David Steindl-Rast
says:

*“Truly every single thing we
have has been given to us, and
not necessarily because we
deserved it.*

*Gratefulness – great fullness –
is the response of the human
heart to the gratuitousness of
all that is.*

*When we give, we plug
ourselves into the aliveness of
the world.”³*

Calvary, our story is one of life,
not death. Because the story of
Christ and God’s people is
always about the renewal of
life...again and again and
again. The Resurrection is
God’s biggest, “*Yes, And...*”:
Yes, death happens...and new
life ALWAYS follows.

So Calvary in 2019 let’s make a
life (perhaps even a new life)
by what we give!

Amen.

³ M.J. Ryan, ed. *A Grateful Heart: Daily Blessings for
the Evening Meal from Buddha to The Beatles* (Conari
Press, San Francisco, CA) 1994, pg 1-2.