

Measuring Faith

Sermon for the 8th Sunday after Trinity

Sermon Text: Mark 12:41-44



⁴¹ And He sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. ⁴³ And He called His disciples to Him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. ⁴⁴ For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had

to live on."

There are differences between people: in one family, there is one child that can get the best grades without working too hard while her sister has to fight to keep from failing. And so it goes in life. Wealth versus poverty, wisdom versus luck, beauty versus ugliness... all of these characteristics are spread out unevenly. What about faith? Is faith a characteristic that one does or does not have? And are there people with great faith and people with very little faith? And if faith is available, where do you get it and how can you measure it? In our sermon text today, Jesus shows us how one can measure faith. In this story, we get to know a woman who had almost only ever known the dark side of life. This woman was a widow. At that time, widows were on the very bottom rung of the social ladder. There was, therefore, no provision for them at all and they had to beg for money to survive. There were others who didn't have to live in the shadows like this woman. They had everything that life had to offer. They were rich and at that time, that was all on display, even in the Temple. In those days, there were actually big boxes set up into which the people could lay their offerings. Whenever there was a large offering, the trumpet choir played very loudly and then everyone gathered with sighs to marvel at the large amounts of money. Just like someone in our time would admire an expensive car or a golden watch... Jesus observed this exact situation. And, like so often, Jesus saw everything differently. He actually had completely ignored the large offering of the rich man. Instead, His gaze fell onto the poor widow who came out of the shadows to throw 2 worthless coins into the offering box. In fact, Jesus observed something in this woman that was missing in the others. It was faith! While the trumpets were silent, Jesus called out loudly: "This poor widow gave more than all the others!" Jesus' statement was a great challenge to everyone who had fixed their eyes on the great mountain of gold. All at once, He had declared null and void everything that people considered important. And what people considered worthless, Jesus placed right up at the very top of the list. Jesus arrives at a different result in His arithmetic than all the others. For Jesus, it wasn't the money that was stacked on the table that mattered, but He looked deeper and searched for faith. The important thing was not how people looked in front of others, but how they looked before God. How does Jesus work His math when He evaluates faith in God? First of all, Jesus is not against people donating money to the church. Jesus is also certainly not against people doing good things. He didn't say that the rich people who had donated so much money had done something wrong. And yet, Jesus shows us that there is something much more important than all the money in the world. He also shows us that there is a much greater gift that transcends all other human gifts. All the money in the world and all the other things that we could otherwise still do, are nothing compared to what God

wants from us. After all, what God wants from us has no limits. God wants everything. He wants our whole life. And that is faith.

The woman who came creeping out of the shadows, didn't have much. But what she had, she gave... without reserve. Jesus observed all of that: He observed fingers that at first held tightly to the coins and He also saw how the fingers then opened – a warm hand revealed two coins – and then the hand let them go. The coins clinked together as they fell out of the hand and into the box. Now the hand was empty. The coins didn't stick to the hand. The money didn't belong to the hand and the hand didn't belong to the money. The hand was now free to belong entirely to God. All of that was revealed when the coins fell into the box. Here, we are shown what it can mean to fear, love, and trust in God above all things. The story about the poor widow is a story of faith that unsettles us because the coins that fell out of the widow's hand can be everything on which we hang our hearts. Faith can mean that we must give everything up. Faith can mean that we must let go of our health or even our lives which we hold on to so tightly. It can be that we must let go of a beloved person. Can we let go, like the widow? Or do the things we love stick to us? Jesus said about the widow: she gave everything she had to live on. She gave up her whole life! Everything that she had... everything that she loved! That is faith.

Why did she do that? And what became of this woman? We never hear anything more about her. Mysteriously, she disappears back into the shadows from whence she came.

To better understand the picture of the widow with the two coins, we must broaden our view and see the whole picture painted for us back in Jerusalem. This is what it looks like: These were Jesus' last few days before His crucifixion. There was great unrest in the city of Jerusalem back then. Once, Jesus drove the money changers out of the Temple and Jesus said afterwards that His body would be the new Temple. All the sacrifices of the Temple would become irrelevant. Only Jesus' sacrifice would matter. This story of the woman with the coins is so short and seems so unimportant that it is almost lost among the events happening in Jerusalem. But Jesus Himself highlights it and wants to use the story to teach us. And what He wants to show us is actually much more than just the meager sacrifice of the woman. He wants to tell us that we, with our many gifts, have much to do. We even lay aside lots of money for God. But what we give and do doesn't matter. God has a different account. In God's currency, all of our sacrifices don't matter at all because we don't give everything. Nor can we. The things of life remain attached to us, even when we try to give them away. And even when we sacrifice for God, we do it for ourselves. The widow does what people can't normally do. She gives everything. And that is the sacrifice that God wants from us... and that He Himself gives.

What that means is shown to us a little later because Passover was in Jerusalem at the time. On one side, thousands of people and the leaders of the people were in the Temple to celebrate Passover. Next to them, completely stripped and worthless, without any human dignity, was our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. He had nothing and then He gave what He had left over and said: "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit!" This is the sacrifice that counts more than any other. Only this sacrifice counts before God. Which currency can we trust 100% and which is like hay and straw? Before God, there can really only be the one sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ because Jesus is the only one who truly gives everything. When I look to Him and what He did for me, I feel how the fingers that hold so tightly to so many things open up. I notice how everything falls out of my hand. I stand there empty and yet, I'm richer than ever before. That is faith in Jesus. It is not a characteristic of me nor of anyone else except Jesus Himself! Amen.