

"How Much is Enough?"

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17; Ps. 127; Mk. 12:38-44

Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church

Rev. David E. Young

November 8, 2009

I sometimes imagine the gospel writers sitting on a bed in a little room with index cards strewn around them, trying to make sense of all the stories they've been collecting about Jesus' life and teachings. They know the high points and the low points and the many points in between. Now they have these cards and the "term paper" assignment and they have to put into some kind of order.

When we look through the four gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - it is easy to see that they made different choices based on what was most important to them. And the order in which the stories occur will vary depending on the theological "message" they are trying to convey.

Is Jesus "for" religion or "against" it? Is what we do - how we behave based on our beliefs - what's important or is what we believe, in and of itself, the important thing?

The location of this story from Mark's gospel sends a mixed message. Are the scribes, the representatives of the religious establishment, "good guys" or "bad guys"? Are they the ones who devour widows' livelihoods and play-act at piety, or are they the ones who understand best what God requires?

This story comes on the heels of Jesus' teaching on the greatest commandment: to love God with all your heart and mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. There happens to be a scribe who is listening to Jesus and agreeing that loving God and loving

neighbor are more important than any burnt offering or sacrifice - any "religious" act.

This response from the scribe leads Jesus to commend him for his understanding. But then Jesus turns around and immediately condemns the scribes for abusing their power and shoring up their religious institution on the backs of the poor.

And remember: all of this is happening in the Temple, the flagship of the religious institution of the day.

Then Jesus sits back to watch what was going on there in the Temple. The Greek Text tells us that he was watching to see how people made their offerings. This word "how" is missing from our translation but it is a key component in my view. It was on Mark's Greek index card, but somehow got lost in the translation...

How were people making their offerings? Isn't this more important than how much they gave? When some threw in large amounts was it with a bit of a flourish? Or was it with a miserly mentality? When this widow approached the offering was it with shuffling feet and humility or with a proud demeanor and a sense of joy?

Whatever the attitude was of those who gave that day, Jesus caught sight of a poor widow as she put in what amounted to about a half a penny.

What a coincidence that right after Jesus condemned those who devour widow's houses, who should show up in the house of God but a widow herself...

She no sooner made her offering than she was gone. We don't know her name. We don't know her motivation in giving. Was she just doing

her duty? Had she received the Temple mailing about the stewardship campaign? Or was something else moving her heart and her soul? We don't know...

We don't know where she went. We don't know what happened to her the next day. But her presence there that day made a lasting impression on Jesus and on his disciples who listened as Jesus explained how her offering was greater than all the rest. (It certainly made an impression on Mark as he lined up his index cards and placed them in order as he told the story of Jesus' march to the cross).

Others may have given out of their abundance and left church to return to their lives of abundance, but she had given it all. She started with poverty and that was how she ended.

She was totally dependent, inside and outside of the Temple... Or, is it more accurate to say that she is the only one in the story who is truly free?

In her life so much is off-limits and out of reach, so much is denied her. Yet, she establishes her independence in an otherwise totally dependent existence.

Is it possible that she was able to experience daily something that others only enjoy occasionally: a daily experience of total reliance upon the grace of God?

Would a daily experience of God's grace be something worth having? Would it be something that was much more valuable than money in the bank, long robes and lengthy prayers and the scorn of Jesus?

Most of the rest of us can attribute our pay checks, our social status, our family connections, and all the rest, to something other than a daily

experience of God's grace. We can take pride in the fact that we are able to provide for ourselves and for others and we have mostly been able to avoid the embarrassing posture of the beggar.

But the widow in this story gives up her independence to take up, once again, her dependence on God.

If she was fearful of her future, worried about her security, would we have found her here in the Temple? If she was worried that she would not have enough, would she have made her offering that day?

Her actions tell us some amazing things about her confidence in the goodness of God. Do our actions speak to us of our confidence that God is able, completely able to provide?

How much security is enough for us? How much history do we need to recall and rehearse in order to remember, on a daily basis, that the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Mary and Martha and Lazarus, the God of this widow and of the well-off, is the God who delights in causing the possible to arise out of the ashes of impossibility?

How much faith is enough? How much abundance is enough for us?

How much awareness of the needs of others do we need to become part of God's plan to alleviate the suffering of others? How much of an experience of God's grace do we need to cultivate a grateful heart, a trusting heart, and to let that gratitude and trust guide us as we make our way into God's future?

How much is enough? And how will we shape our lives to live in greater dependence on the grace of God? It's a question each of us faces and each of us must answer, each and every day.