

SLD11.12.06 32nd Ordinary
Stewardship Commitment Sunday
EPC
Hebrews 10:19-25
Mark 12:41-44

“The Risk of the Rich”

Today is Stewardship Sunday, the single day of the Christian year when we make no bones about the simple ugly fact that it takes money to run a church. Oh, we dress it up with appeals to the intellect and the heart, we talk about the importance of giving time and talents, we make a stab at stretching the imagination beyond today's balance sheet and into tomorrow's mission, but the bottom line is that every church has a bottom line that has to be met in order to keep its doors open.

Now maybe such bald expression of such an unsentimental truth strikes some of you as rather impolite, if not downright “un-Christian.” Especially when the aim of any Stewardship sermon worth the paper it's written on is to get people to open not just their hearts but their pocketbooks. But hey, I'm just following Jesus' lead.

As I reflected on how to approach today's sermon, I thought to myself, now “what would Jesus do?” And what I discovered, at least in today's lectionary text is that what Jesus does on Stewardship Sunday is set up camp right next to the collection plate so he can check out just exactly how much people are actually forking over. So he can pass comment on it. Out loud. To anybody who happens to be listening.

Talk about tacky! Can't you just hear him?

Wow, this guy gave a lot! 'Course he can afford it.

Oh man, look at that cheapskate – spends more on tickets to Cirque du Soleil than he does on God's work. Brother.

Ahhh, now look at that little kid bringing up her allowance – isn't that sweet? I'd say her parents are doing right by her.

Now this fellow, he makes a fortune; bet he's gonna be high ticket. Man, are you kidding me? You can do better than that!

And so forth, as the faithful bring their annual commitments forward to dedicate before God.

No doubt his disciples are scandalized but that Jesus, it always was hard to make him behave.

Until up to the altar shuffles this gnarly old woman, a widow, dressed in black, hunched and limping from an aching hip. Above the collection basket she lifts a trembling hand, and from her gnarled, arthritic palm tumble two dull and dented copper coins.

They make no sound, these widow's mites; take no room in the basket as they lose themselves amidst the other change. But for Jesus these paltry coins rock the universe, shifting it a little closer to the kingdom. "For of her want," as the King James version puts it, "the widow did cast in all that she had, even all her living."

At the moment this life-broken, heart-stomped widow risks for God's kingdom everything she has, everything stops for Jesus, and time is suspended, as once again the veil to the temple is torn. Immediately Jesus calls his disciples to come witness what he has seen. For the trust, the faith, the surrender of that trembling hand, why, it's everything he's tried to teach them!

Y'all come on over her and see this, Jesus calls to his disciples.

See what? they ask one another as they crowd closer in.

Move over, Andrew, I can't see what he's pointing at.

Can anybody see what he's talking about?

He's pointing to the collection basket.

How come?

Beats me. Because it's so full?

No, he's holding up a couple copper coins.

I thought you weren't supposed to take money out of the basket.

Hush. He's trying to teach us something.

Truly I tell you, Jesus says, this poor widow has put in more than everybody else who's contributed today, for everyone else contributed out of their abundance, while this woman, out of her poverty, put in everything she had.

Well, mumbles Peter to John, that might preach but two copper coins sure ain't gonna pay the bills.

To which, I have to say, I agree. I mean, in every church you got your "kingdom moments" and you got your "bottom line moments" and they rarely do coincide. Finance hardly ever meets with Worship. The Sunday liturgy is rarely based on a balance sheet. It's unlikely the choir anthem will ever be "Money Makes the World Go Around."

Generally speaking, you and I responsible Presbyterians worship God in *this* moment, and tackle our challenge budget in *that* one. Session meetings

open with a cursory devotion but move quickly to the *real* business of the meeting, the update from the Treasurer.

But today's story is different. In today's story, faith and finances collide. In today's story, money matters and kingdom matters unite; trust and the treasury join hands and dance a little minuet. And to the disciples' surprise, the musical key in this awkward marriage dance is not quantity but risk.

Regardless of the bills facing the disciples – and no question but that they cut corners where they can but all that traveling around the Middle East doesn't come cheap, plus you gotta eat and that Judas packs it away like a centurion. And speaking of centurions, you gotta pay *them* a stipend to keep them off Jesus' back – but regardless of the bills, what Jesus *really* values, according to today's story, is not the *amount* people are forking over into the collection plate but the level of *risk* they're willing to take for the kingdom. How close to the edge they're willing to walk. How much discomfort, insecurity, even fear they're willing to face in order to surrender what they have to the God who rules their lives.

Which, as we all know, is just a little harder for the rich. And the way we know this, of course, is because you and I *are* rich.

Oh, you may not describe yourself that way but the rest of the world would. And sure, we all know people who are a whole lot richer than we are. But for the purposes of both today's text and the global economy, most of us in this sanctuary fall somewhere in the top 1% of the world's wealthy.

And as a result, most of us also know only too well all about the challenges and responsibilities of the rich: the houses to keep up, the children's

education to save for, the retirement plan, the second home. Everywhere you turn there are more expenses to meet, more debt to pay off, more bills to pay. For the thing about being rich that most of us knows is that it's really more about having more bills than it is about having more money.

And so, come Stewardship time in the church, you and I scan our household budgets and our anticipated cash flow and make responsible decisions about what sort of commitment we can afford and still keep all our other obligations in balance. Which, as Little Tree says, "is reasonable." It's responsible. Sometimes it's even generous. Perhaps more importantly to many of us, it's how mature adults go about managing their finances: we give out of our abundance.

But mature, responsible giving out of abundance gets no rise out of Jesus in today's text. Rather it's the widow's inadvisable risk of "giving it all away" that he calls his disciples to witness. Though I doubt they like seeing it any more than we do. For God may rule the universe but we prefer to rule our checkbooks. God may be sovereign over our lives, but we'd just as soon maintain sovereignty over our finances, thank you very much.

But there's no way around Jesus' focus today, not so much on the *amount* given as to the *risk* taken on behalf of God's kingdom.

It's the *risk for faith* toward which I'd like us to turn the eyes of our hearts on this Commitment Sunday. It's the edge of discomfort, of insecurity, of surrender, toward which I wish you and I would push ourselves and our pledges. If we cannot yet give everything we have to God, yet what *are* we willing to risk

for the Kingdom? When you consider your pledge this morning, *is* there any sense of risk around it? Any hint of sacrifice or uncertainty? Or would you characterize it as merely reasonable, responsible, fiscally appropriate.

I have to tell you that it's only because of the deeply personal, heart-stopping, life-rearranging risk I took in answering God's call to be installed here that I even dare to press this question to you. If too often what I offer seem not unlike those two pitiful copper coins, yet I know in my heart that I risked almost everything I knew to be true about myself to come here and be church with you.

But here's what else I want you to know. If I am well-acquainted with the angst and uncertainty of risking much for faith, yet I am also the recipient every day of the blessings of that risk. Every day I serve this church I do battle with my hunger for solitude and open time, but every day God rewards me with myriad treasures and delight that accompany my service here.

As it's turning out, (God knowing what God is doing and all) I'm finding this church to be the sort of community in which it's surprisingly safe to take faith risks. I believe this is because Emory is a community built on relationship, or at least on the intention of loving one another well, which makes it a pretty safe place to risk being who you are. Which is why, of course, we're such a mess. But who would argue we're not a loveable mess?

What I notice, too, is that when we humans feel loved and accepted for who we are, we tend to grow and deepen in our faith, to tolerate one another and forgive more easily, to laugh more often and live more lightly...and...to take more risks.

What Jesus witnesses to his disciples through the widow's gift is the richness of risking for faith. It's a simple, universal principle, really – the more you give, the more you get. Jesus just pushes it a little further. Don't just give out of your abundance, he teaches his disciples. Dare to walk that edge where your faith and your finances collide. Give until you're uncomfortable, until you're not sure how you'll manage, until it feels like a risk.

Risk much, and you will receive much in return. Risk much for your faith and today's balance sheet and tomorrow's mission will take care of themselves. Risk much for Jesus Christ and in return you'll get more than you ever imagined, even...the Kingdom of God.

To the glory of God. Amen.