

The internet has changed everything. That’s what I was thinking as I pondered the results of our voting last week. Despite all the bad things, social media has done some good things. For one thing, it got a lot of young people out to vote. But even before that, it enabled a lot of ordinary folks to give to candidates on a scale never seen before. And that enabled other ordinary folk, including a lot of women, to run for office in numbers never seen before. Thanks, in large measure, to social media, we have elected to the House of Representatives our first two Muslim women, the first Native American woman, and a female pediatrician. Texas will send its first Latina to Congress, Massachusetts will send its first African American woman, and Arizona and Tennessee will send their first women to the Senate. Those \$5, \$10, and \$20 donations went a long way this year.

So you could say that one of the most remarkable stories of this election is not a story about the big money—though there was

plenty of that—but a story about a whole lot of little money that made a big difference. And with that in mind, I approached the story of the widow's mite in the Gospel of Mark.

You may be very familiar with this story and with the typical interpretation of it. You may have heard and I have certainly preached stewardship sermons on this text that lift up this widow who gives two coins which is everything she has to the temple treasury. And you've heard pastors, including me, say that this is how we should live. This is how we should give.

But I'm appalled to learn that this take on the text takes this text completely out of context. As I read commentaries for this sermon, I realized that we pastors have been misusing the widow's mite in order to beg for money. So, in an act of repentance, what I want to do today is to look more closely at the widow's situation so we can better understand her story.

First, some general comments. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is always coming into conflict with the priests and the scribes. They

were part of what we could call the “temple industrial complex.” In Jesus’ day, the Jerusalem temple was the absolute center of Jewish political, economic and spiritual power. The priests held the power; the scribes were the think tank scholars and lawyers who helped them to keep it. Together these men held the power, but they suspected that Jesus wanted to seize it. That’s why they wanted to take him out, so it was very risky for Jesus to call them out. But he kept doing it anyway.

That’s what’s happening in our text today. Jesus is sitting opposite the treasury, watching people coming into the temple, into the corridors of power, to pay their tithes and their taxes. He watches the rich come in wearing their long robes, putting lots of coins that go clang, clang into one of thirteen metal collection boxes. They are doing this because they want to be seen and heard, but they don’t want to see or hear the poor widow who comes in with her two copper coins that go plink, plink. Jesus looks at these long-robed religious leaders and calls them out because they are

wearing a fake faith. They don't really love God. If they did, they would show it by loving this widow.

But they are there to give their full support to a system that preys on widows, a system that encourages the poor to give what they truly need while rewarding the rich who give out of their abundance, in other words, give what they don't need. Reminds me of those who preach the prosperity gospel. They say to widows watching on TV, "Send me your money and God will make you rich." Well that's a great system for making somebody rich, for making the preacher prosper! Jesus sees it all, and says it plain, "They devour widows' houses."

So we put aside the traditional interpretation of the text that commends the poor widow because Jesus wants us to condemn the system that keeps her poor. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus fights against the system. In Chapter 7, he complains that the scribes are encouraging people to give money to the temple rather than care for their aging parents. In Chapter 11, he tells the

moneychangers in the temple that they have turned a house of prayer into a den of robbers. When Jesus overturns the tables of the moneychangers, it is pretty clear that the reason the priests and scribes want to kill him is because he keeps biting the hand that is feeding them. It's what he says about the system not what he says about salvation that sends him to the cross.

That's the situation. Now let's look at two conversations that bookend this scene. Earlier, in Chapter 12, a scribe with scruples comes up to Jesus and asks him which commandment is the first of all. And Jesus recites to him the commandment to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Then Jesus adds, "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

This sincere scribe agrees with Jesus, and surprisingly goes on to say that loving God and loving neighbor is "much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." [Mk 12:33] In other words, more important than what goes on in the temple, more important than the System. Let that sink in: Loving God and loving

neighbor are more important than all the religious services going on in the temple.

Now, if loving God and loving neighbor are indeed more important than all the offerings and sacrifices, that poses a big problem for the System. For one thing, it raises the question, why are the rich giving gifts to the temple treasury instead of giving alms to this woman who is in dire poverty? Do they think that they can love God by praying long prayers while ignoring the needs of their neighbor? Jesus doesn't think so. The truth is that the best way to love God *is* by loving our neighbor.

Here's another truth that the victims of fire north and south of us are living: nothing we build lasts forever. The System, because it is man-made, is going to collapse eventually, no matter how much money we pour into it. Jesus makes this clear in a conversation with his disciples that takes place immediately after they encounter the widow.

Jesus' disciples are a bunch of hicks who are a long way from home. They are like me coming from Billings, Montana, to go to school in Boston, Massachusetts, wandering the streets, all wide-eyed and wonderstruck. Jesus sees them marveling at the majesty of the temple. It has been standing for hundreds of years, and during the reign of King Herod, the whole Temple Mount has just undergone a massive renovation and expansion. Nevertheless, Jesus tells them that all these impressive buildings are going to be destroyed. "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." [Mk 13:2]

He was right. The great and glorious temple was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70, just a generation after Jesus. The whole temple system, with all its rituals and sacrifices, with all its power and prestige, came crashing down.

The Jesus movement which had long, deep roots in Jewish practice and in temple worship, survived the trauma of this destruction because the disciples had experienced the resurrection.

Because Jesus rose from the dead, they knew that the dwelling of their God was not a place but a person. In the resurrection, they saw how God dwells in Jesus Christ. Jesus himself is the new temple in a new Jerusalem.

This is hugely important. If God can dwell in Jesus Christ, that means that God can dwell in us, wherever we are, whoever we are. We don't need a temple, we don't need a priesthood. All we need is people. As the good folk at Our Savior Lutheran in Paradise are learning the hard way, the Church is not a building. The Church is a people.

There are other important lessons in our Scripture lesson today. Mark teaches us that the edifice known as Christendom is coming crashing down, and if we want to figure out what it means to follow Jesus in this new situation, we have to quit focusing all our attention on maintaining buildings and learn how to be a movement again.

Jesus says to us, “Go tell that widow not to put her trust in the System, but to put her trust in her Savior.” The System will gladly take everything you’ve got and leave you with nothing (and still come crashing down). Our Savior will take everything you are and give you the life you’ve always longed for and it will last forever.

I can no longer use the story of the widow’s mite to get you to give money. That’s OK. I’d rather use it to get you to join a movement. This year has been exciting. From Parkland to Oakland, we’ve seen young adults all across the country become engaged and empowered to build a new movement of justice, peace, and love. I am so inspired by them, and one of the things that we are going to be looking at in this next year is whether and how we can minister to them and how they can minister to us. So I’m not going to ask you to give your all to the budget this year. Instead, I am going to ask you to give your all to Jesus Christ. Don’t give a dime just to maintain these buildings. It’s a total waste of money if we aren’t using them to minister to the Body of Christ.

What we are beginning to see in this country is the same thing that we need to see in our churches, the building of a movement. We don't need to rewrite our mission statement because we already have the great commandment: Love God; love your neighbor.

At Willow Glen that means raising up children and youth, nurturing families, walking to Emmaus with seekers, caring for our seniors, and welcoming homeless women, some of them widows. It also means figuring out how to love our young adults instead of losing them. All these folks are our neighbors. By loving them, we are doing something more important than all of our long prayers and religious services. By loving them, we are loving God. I make no apologies when I ask you to give your all for them.

So pray about how you can be a part of this movement and fill out your commitment form and return it next week. Don't think of it as paying a temple tax. Think of it as a way to campaign for Christ, a way to vote your values, confess your faith, live your love.

As this election has made perfectly clear, there is a horrendous lack of love in the world today. And the Church is nothing if it isn't God's love on the move. So, yes, God wants it all. God wants all of *you* and *all* of you . But what you put in the plate is not nearly as important as what you put on your plate. I pray that you will put enough Christ on your plate so that you can love God and love your neighbor, with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. Let me tell you, your love adds up. God's grace gathers everyone's gifts and makes them grow. In the Church, we learned a long time ago that small donors make a big difference. And we are on the move today because we know that no matter who wins the election, God's love wins in the end! Amen!