

“Don’t Go to Church”
Mark 12:41-13:2

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[Jesus] sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, 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.” As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

“Don’t Go to Church.” If they ever have a contest for “worst sermon title,” I think I just might have a chance with this one. “Don’t Go to Church”—not necessarily the message one expects to hear from a pastor. But I want to be clear right from the start this morning. I would sincerely like to invite everyone in this room, from this moment on, *to stop going to church*. Just stop. That being said, you are here now, so I would like for you to stay for just a few more minutes and at least hear what I have to say.

Today is Stewardship Sunday. And you know this works. Our leadership on the Session is asking each of us to fill out a giving card, indicating the amount of money we can commit to giving to the church in 2010. And in a few moments we’ll all be invited to come forward and place those cards in these baskets. Our theme this year is “Faith in God, Faith in our Future.”

So before I elaborate on my request that you *stop going to church*, I’d like to take a second to say something about money. Does that make you uncomfortable? A money talk? It does for most people. Psychologists today refer to money as “the last taboo,” and claim that clients in therapy will talk about most any topic before they’ll bring up the subject of personal finance. Real conversation about money—about how much we earn, how much we spend, how much we save, how much we waste, and how much we give away—is conversation that makes us at least a little squeamish.

But let’s talk about money for a bit. After all, Jesus talked a lot about money. In fact, did you know that if you added up everything Jesus said about money—about wealth, poverty, earning money, giving it away, about the virtues of having money, and about how loving it can be our downfall—if you added it all up, you would find that one-sixth of what Jesus had to say was about money. In fact, the kingdom of God is the only topic Jesus addressed more in the gospels—which makes it somewhat ironic that money is a subject we shy away from.

So what if we followed Jesus’ lead? What if we talked about money here in the church one-sixth of the time? Every sixth sermon, every sixth prayer, every sixth hymn. Actually, I’m not sure

that we have too many hymns about money. But what if we talked about money that much? Well, for one thing, you *really might* stop going to church!

Our gospel story today is, among other things, about money. Jesus and the disciples are in the temple in Jerusalem. And Jesus does a curious thing. He sits down opposite the treasury and just watches as people present their offerings. Now that act alone would make us cringe, wouldn't it? Can you imagine if Jesus were here with us in worship, and if right before the offering, I said, "It is now time to present our weekly tithes and offerings. Jesus himself will be coming around with a collection plate." And then what if Jesus looked in each envelope, just to see what you put in. That's sort of what took place in the temple that day in Jerusalem.

Many rich people put in large sums, the gospel says, but then a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then Jesus called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, 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."

The widow's mite. This is a gospel story that plays nicely into the hands of a pastor trying to encourage a congregation to give more this year and to give generously. I would like to steer away from that in this sermon, however. After all, as you will recall, this morning I'm encouraging you not to go to church anymore, remember? So let me say this about Jesus' encounter with the widow in the temple.

Jesus says of the widow, "She has put in everything she had. Everything." And I can't help but wonder if Jesus didn't see something of himself in that woman. All that she had to give, she gave—and in just a few days in Mark's gospel, Jesus, too, would give everything he had to give. In the grand scheme of things, the widow didn't show up with much. She wasn't powerful in the traditional sense, and the expectation was that her life would come and go without much of an impact. And in the grand scheme of things, Jesus didn't show up with much, either. Born in a barn to unwed teenage parents, he wasn't powerful in the traditional sense, and the expectation among many was that his life would come and go without much of an impact. But Jesus knew, as he watched that woman drop her coins into the treasury, that he too would give all he had.

We're talking about stewardship today, and the best stewardship question we can ask is not, "How much can I part with next year?" The *best* stewardship question we can ask is, "What is my life worth? *What is my life worth?*" Have you ever asked yourself that question? The temptation is to reduce it all to a financial snapshot: savings, checking, mutual funds, bonds... But the question is *not* "What is my *net* worth?" but "What is my *life* worth." There's a huge difference, or at least there ought to be.

The question "What is my life worth?" begs us to remember that we only live once. Our chances in this life to love and be loved, to show kindness and to work hard—they're the only chances we'll get this side of heaven. And so I wonder: if you don't ask yourself *today*, "What is my life worth?" then what are you waiting for? We're all busy. We've all got too much to do—too much to think about, too many places to go, too many lists, too much on our schedule. But if

we're not entertaining the question, "What is my life worth?" then what are we doing? What's all the busy-ness for?

Take a moment right now, please, and ask yourself the question, "What is my life worth?" Think about it. And if you start thinking about money, that's ok—but don't think about it too long. Move on to other things. Close your eyes if it helps. Ask yourself, "What is it all worth? What is it all for? What is my life worth?"

You don't have to look at me, because I'm not going to say anything for a little bit.

"What is my life worth?" The temptation is always to answer that question with a list of things that we *do*. But friends, this is a question of *being before doing*. The question is not, "What do you do with all that time you have?" but rather, "Who are you and what is it all worth?"

Jesus looked to the widow as an example, not because of the amount she gave, but because *she knew what her life was worth. And knowing what her life was worth, she gave it all accordingly.* My earnest prayer for us, as a growing, vibrant family of faith, is that we do the same.

So, what time is it? Can someone look at his or her watch and tell me what time it is? (There are two things, by the way, that preachers should never do. The first is to tell the congregation not to go to church. The second is to actually ask people to look at their watches during a sermon!) Ok, so what time is it? ____? Ok good. Now, mark the time and remember. Starting now, on November 15th, 2009, at ____, no one here is ever going to church again! We're not going to church anymore.

From here on out, we're going to *BE the church*. Let me be clear. We're still going to come here—to worship. But this place is not the church. *We* are the church. And we will still come here to worship—to be equipped and sent to *be the church in the world*. We will still come here to worship—to ask the question again and again: *What is my life worth?* And finding that answer in Christ and in Christ's call in our lives, we will go from this place, strengthened to *be the church* in the world. There can be no greater act of stewardship—than to give all that we have in this way. Amen.