

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
November 8, 2009

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The story of the widow's mite: I think the text we heard today we think in terms of that overarching title for this story, the widow's mite and it being a story about exemplary giving, how there were some who had more wealth who gave to the temple treasury and then there was this poor widow who gave her last two coins, or maybe they weren't her last two, but they were the smallest denomination in currency, the word that's used in the Greek text indicates that it's the smallest denomination, maybe each coin was worth about a quarter of a cent. So here this poor widow gives out of her poverty to the temple system. How often have we heard this story as a wonderful story of selfless and trusting giving? Does that sound familiar? Somebody said to me this week: "oh, Marianne, you're preaching on Sunday and the text is "the widow's mite". What a great text during our annual giving campaign. But I suggest to you that that conventional understanding of this text opens the way for a great deal of abuse and misunderstanding about what this text is about. And let me give you an illustration, as I have seen and heard this text abused in horrible ways. Many years ago I heard a televangelist, I think his name was Robert Tilton and he was addressing his audience through the television and primarily his female audience and he was encouraging them to give to the ministry of his program and he was saying even if you are subsisting on your social security check, give that check to this ministry, send it in and let God know that you trust that God will ultimately provide and Jesus will bless you tenfold for giving even your last social security check to this ministry. It's a way to show your faith and your good confidence in the way of God. Robert Tilton was a handsome man. He had a good sort of chillized face, dark hair sort of slicked back. He looked a little bit like Don Draper, who those of you who watch "Madmen". Handsome, wore good suits, had a good speaking voice and here he was calling upon his audience to give to the ministry. Robert Tilton did very well. He prospered. He is no longer on television because he was indicted for embezzlement and fraud – thanks be to God! But he used this text that we heard in Mark today as the launching off point for inviting an appeal to support the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of God. I suggest that the story that we heard today is not a quaint vignette about selfless, trusting giving. I suggest that the story that we heard today is an indictment. It is a lament on a religious institution that has lost its way. Religion at its best seeks to bind up the wounds of existence; it seeks to bring healing to the wounds of existence. The Old Testament prophets and of course Jesus in the New Testament as well, talks about the importance of the ministry of God being to take care of the least of these – widows, orphans. Our Psalm today calls us to that, that the justice of God which is very different from the justice of the marketplace all too often that the justice of God takes everyone into consideration and those who are the most vulnerable in terms of identity, in terms of economics, in terms of safety; those are the people that the religious institutions are there to support and make sure they are safe. Religious institutions are there to manifest in a body what the world would look like if God were in charge. Religion is there to help support the needy. It's a way to embody as I said God's justice for all. And I suggest that this text today is a lament, that the institution that

Jesus is referring to here in the first century world was not doing that. And let me show you why I have come to that conclusion. The text begins with Jesus saying “Beware of the scribes!” Now the scribes were a literate class, maybe 2% of the population in those days was literate, a literate class and their job was to write up contracts and interpret them and it was part of their job to make sure that when someone was widowed, a woman was widowed and that in order to help her take care of the existing estate and the affairs of her deceased husband, that contracts needed to be written up; women without the accompaniment of a male in that culture didn’t have a voice, they didn’t have legal standing; same is true for orphans; they weren’t part of a family system; they had basically no identity in the society. So the scribes were assigned to write up contracts, interpret them and help the widows settle their estates. It was common knowledge that the scribes, even though they purported themselves well in public, they were well thought of, considered to be trustworthy, well-spoken, they would wear the long robes associated with the temple system; they would indulge in long prayers publicly as a way to underscore their integrity. It was well known that the scribes would exploit the widows; the scribes would give themselves a percentage of the estate as a way to pay back for their services and all too often when they did that, they paid themselves very handsomely and they came outdoing well and the widow came out even worse. That was understood, so when Jesus says “beware of the scribes, they devour widow’s houses and for the sake of appearances say long prayers. When Jesus is seen going down opposite the treasury of the temple and he watches people coming into the temple and putting in money to the coffers and he observes that there are rich people who put in large sums – great – then the text says a poor widow comes and puts in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Now, the text then says then Jesus calls his disciples to him and I suggest that this is a heads-up for us as well, Jesus is now calling us to him and he is going to give us a teaching on this; and Jesus says “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. All of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she has – all she had to live on. Now that may sound simply descriptive until you realize the verse that immediately follows this one – and unfortunately we won’t hear that until next week, but I suggest that Mark 13:1 is a direct response to this scene. Jesus exits the temple, looks back at the temple and says “not one stone will be left upon another. This system has to come down”. And the temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. Now I want to remind us that chapters were not put into the text until around the eleventh century, a thousand years after this was written. So originally you would see a whole bunch of text, chapters were not put in until about the eleventh century and then verses about two hundred years after that and there had been demarcations made in the text to make it easier to find our way, but I suggest that the text, the verse that immediately follows this – not one stone will be left upon another – is a further indictment on what Jesus experienced in the temple that day. The scribes who exploit widows, a widow who gives what she needed to live on to the treasury. What kind of a system would motivate her to feel that that was part of her duty to God was to give the very last that she really needed to live on, that for that to be a motivation for the poor when the warp and call of the religious institution is to take care of the poor, to take care of the widow and the orphan and to make sure that they are not left bereft. So I suggest that the conventional understanding of this text, “the Widow’s Mite” is an example of great selfless, trusting giving is

not true to this text, that this is rather a lament, an indictment about what can happen in an institution. Now I think this text invites us to ask two important questions; one is: "are we twenty-first century scribes?" and the second is "Do we have good religion?" Imagine that Jesus is watching us coming in and out of this place today just as he was observing people coming in and out of the temple as he was observing in the first century. Imagine that he is observing us coming in and out of this place. What does he see? What does he think? Are we twenty-first century scribes? Do we have good religion? I love scripture! It challenges us; it invites us to ask the hard questions and we are a community that gathers around it. Thanks be to God!