

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Its that time of year when our stewardship kicks in and the various committees within congregations are assembling, sharpening their pencils, prayerfully anticipating the giving, and attempting to put together a budget for the coming fiscal year. Interestingly, we have this wonderful story in the Gospel of the lowly widow and the offering of her last two copper coins along with the widow in our first lesson who gives the last of her provisions to an immigrant named Elijah. Giving NOT from abundance, but giving all...churches frequently utilized these widows as examples of giving during annual budget campaigns. Without much thought or consideration, we then associate the widow in our Gospel lesson with money and giving simply because of what *WE* think about money and what *WE assume* God thinks about money. We also associate this narrative for today with our assumptions about money and stewardship and in turn, our assumptions about money and stewardship impact how we hear these stories and how we interpret them. But when we can only view these widows and their actions through the lens of our assumptions about stewardship and money, we provoke feelings of guilt and shame that only serve as a barrier and a hinderance to the Good News of the liberating love of God through our faith in Jesus Christ.

If I were to address this congregation this morning using these two widows and their giving to boost our financial giving then I am basically going to be saying that God's favor or love is greater or more accessible only when we are willing to give to the degree, we hear about in the widows giving. In other words, I'd be saying...if you give more, God's grace is better for you? What then does this say about the Gospel...the promise of Jesus Christ and the cross if this is so? It says that *OUR works...OUR offering*, no matter how significant or even insignificant, is more important than the death and resurrection of Jesus and it voids or negates the cross...after all, *WE* can give all *WE* have...therefore Jesus died for nothing because *OUR* offering or *OUR* sacrifice becomes *OUR* justification before God. Are we to believe that these widows and their giving are used to show us that God's grace is contingent upon our giving, or are they directing us to something else?

I'll begin with Saint Paul in his letter to the church in Rome to argue this notion about the outcome of our giving when he writes:

²¹ But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³ since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴ they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶ it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:21-26)

In the following chapter Paul also says:

⁵ But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. (Romans 4:5)

As Lutherans, this notion about works righteousness that Paul is addressing is at the very heart of our Lutheran theology as the principle author Philipp Melancthon declared in our Lutheran

statement of faith we have come to know as the Augsburg Confession. This is a document consisting of twenty-eight articles that clearly state our Lutheran theology. Article IV Concerning Justification states this:

[IV. Concerning Justification]

Furthermore, it is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight...¹

I mention St Paul addressing the Romans and our Confessions because they open us up to other things that the Gospel lesson can teach us. From the start of the Gospel lesson, Jesus warns us about the scribes and we in turn are quick to judge and condemn the scribes and their arrogant and haughty ways. He then begins watching as the gifts are being poured into the treasury by the "rich people," making a lot of noise as their money jingles and clangs into the receptacles. This is done to draw even more attention to the rich...the richer one is, the more racket they make as they feed the temple system and the scribes with their money.

But Jesus then points out something getting lost in the noise of this scene. Jesus directs us to the humble gift of a poor widow because he can hear more than the faint noise her coins can make. With the two copper coins, she gives of all she has, and this is a gift that Jesus confirms as worthy by commenting on it.

So, que the violins as our hearts fill with the giving of the widow as we aspire to be just like her with our giving so we too can find favor from Christ for our worthy giving. But before we jump on this assumption that this is the Good News let's look closer.

Yes, the widow graciously puts her last two coins into the "temple treasury" or the "offering box" as terms parse out from the Greek. Her giving is profound and we then "judge" her works as righteous and the rich folks drawing attention to themselves along with haughty arrogant scribes... we judge as unrighteous. And we do this because of our understanding of what we think stewardship entails along with what Jesus himself is teaching. So we favor the widow and criticizing the scribes and the rich for their vainglory. But before we draw our conclusions, listen again carefully to what Jesus is teaching:

"Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,³⁹ and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!

We quickly judge these holy men in their vanity as hypocrites and unrighteous because we are directed to their arrogant and haughty piety! Likewise, we judge the rich folks as unrighteous *in their vanity* for arrogantly drawing attention to themselves just like the scribes with their giving and we "**JUDGE**" the widow as righteous! But when it comes to giving...if we a totally honest...we as a congregation want the giving of the rich folks over the widows giving but we

¹ Kolb, Robert ; Wengert, Timothy J. ; Arand, Charles P.: *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000. "The Augsburg Confession – German Text – Article IV: Justification", pages 38–40.

hide our true nature in our judgment because of the humble widow. But as Jesus begins setting up this tension with his teaching today, he also begins to reveal the Good News for us today.

Listen again to what Jesus says:

"Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,³⁹ and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!

BUT, BUT listen to what Jesus says next!

⁴⁰ They devour widows' houses...

I'll bet when we hear this we dislike these scribes even more. And here is this humble widow giving her last two copper coins...I guess we are thinking she **SHOULD BE PRAISED AND COMMENDED!** But at this point I go back to my very Lutheran question...are we really being taught that God's grace is conditional? Is this Gospel lesson about *OUR* giving? Or is Jesus using the widow to teach us that there is more to this story than our literal eyes can see and what our literal minds can parse out?

Look **NOT** at what the widow is giving but at what she is giving to and ask yourself...why is this widow contributing to a temple system, that has arrogant and haughty scribes that more than likely have devoured her house? She is precisely the kind of defenseless woman the scribes take advantage of.² Is Jesus commending this widow for giving to a system that devours her and despises him? The scribes are the ones who earlier in this Gospel profess that Jesus is possessed by Beelzebul and later seek to arrest Jesus by stealth, and kill him. Is Jesus really commending this widow for contributing to this system...because this is where her last two coins are going.

At this point if we take the focus off what we think this lesson is about and focus on God, it is in this giving to such a corrupted temple system that we find the Good News for today.

Like the rich who love to draw attention to themselves with the noise they make as their money jingles into the receptacles, we too are drawn into the racket being made by this story with our judgments, our assumptions, and our concept of stewardship. Yes, there is something to be said about the giving that is taking place within this story...but listening to St Paul through the lens of our Lutheran understanding about our faith and our justification through that faith, we quickly see that this story is not just about *our* giving...it's really about another giving. Nonetheless, if you still think that this lesson is about *our giving*, ask then, is the Good News about something we do or is it about something God does for us?

Today Jesus is teaching us **HOW TO** recognize true giver...and breaking news, it's not us.

Unfortunately, we entangle this widow in our understanding of stewardship as it turns up in the lectionary this time of year. Stewardship is a word that describes how a follower of Jesus Christ faithfully lives and travels through this life and **NOT** just about how the church pays its bills. Stewardship is the way we use the abundance that God has given us and entrusted to our care in

² Rev. Gregory Fryer, pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church New York, New York, brilliantly makes this observation in his sermon appointed for this Sunday, the 25th Sunday of Pentecost, November 10, 2024.

order to love God and love our neighbor.³ The magnitude of stewardship goes beyond giving money and paying bills, it is the task of supervising or taking care of something...something like our life and our faith and how that faith works in our journey through life, not just on a Sunday morning in here, but out there all week long.

We know all too well that the squeaky wheel gets the grease and we are attracted to the racket raised in this Gospel lesson through our understandings of giving and our false sense of stewardship. However, this Gospel lesson is not intended to ramp up our giving...nor our judgment...today Jesus is directing us to recognize the “True-Giver,” the One who gives all He has to a broken and corrupt system. May we see what Jesus is pointing the disciples and us to see...that it is God who is the one giving two copper coins that are His creation and the very life of His only Son Jesus Christ...given to free us all from a broken system called sin and death...

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

³ Charles Lane & Grace Duddy Pomroy, *Embracing Stewardship. How to put stewardship at the heart of your congregation's life.* Edina, MN: Huff Publishing Associates, LLC. 2016, page 141.