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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Mark 12:38-44
The Widow's Mite

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

³⁸And in his teaching he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to go about in long robes, and to have salutations in the market places ³⁹and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, ⁴⁰*who devour widows' houses* and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

In this morning's sermon, I want to discuss three people in this story: the scribe, the widow, and our Lord Jesus. Let's begin with the scribe.

Hypocrisy is horrible thing on earth! It angers the Lord, grieves the angels, discredits the good name of whatever cause it is connected with, and is even more awful when it includes meanness.

In our Gospel text, Jesus says that the scribes “devour widows' houses,” all the while pretending piety. That is heartless. When they should pity the widow, they instead devour her. They can get away with it, I suppose, because they have the prestige of their holy office on their side, and because the widow is often too poor to mount much of a fight back.

My wife, Carol, loves her church's window depicting the story of the Widow's Mite. The striking thing about that window is that the widow is young. She is a young mother, with a baby in her arms and a young son at her side. Carol said that before seeing this window, she had assumed the widow in today's story to be old and frail, which I bet is how many of us picture her. But strictly speaking, the Bible itself does not specify the age of the widow. She might be a young woman for all we know. Why not? Young woman can lose their husbands too, in a thousand ways. They lose them in war, in accidents, in sickness. They can be struck down in an instant of wrath. They can drown or be lost in plagues. And when something like that happens, especially in ancient times, the widow was left vulnerable. She depended on people rallying around her. If they did not do that, she could well be bereft of help, for the ancient world did not have the governmental social programs that we have.

In the widow's situation of vulnerability, to “devour her house” would be a cruel thing. If the scribes did that, shame of them! Likewise with us: If we have a job that involves ripping off the widow, the orphan, the elderly, or any of the weak ones of this world, then we should find another job as soon as we can.

This strikes me as a good point to lift up Martin Luther's interpretation of the Ninth and Tenth Commandments -- the coveting commandments. The traditional

interpretation of those commandments points to the heart and asks us to get the desire of our hearts under control.

The Ninth Commandment concerns our neighbor's "house"; that is, our neighbor's possessions. On the traditional interpretation, we are forbidden to want the material things of this world *overmuch*. Instead we are called to train the heart toward simplicity and contentment with what we have or can honestly obtain.

The Tenth Commandment likewise concerns the heart. It says, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's "spouse." On the traditional interpretation, the commandment forbids us to desire that which we *ought not to have*, including our neighbor's spouse.

So, that is the traditional interpretation of coveting: we should so train our heart that our even our *desires* are pure.

Luther does not deny this traditional interpretation, but his mind heads off in another direction -- more in the direction of commerce and law. Luther was keenly aware of the various ways in which people can rip each other off without actually breaking the law. He knew that innocent consumers could be lured into bad investments. He knew that clients could be coaxed away by subtle hints and damaging suggestions. And Luther said, Stop it! Stop exploiting the system to deprive your neighbor of his house or his spouse. Do not devour the widow's house.

This is always a temptation. The attempt to devour the widow's house goes on continually. This past week I took a long subway and bus ride out to Nassau County to visit our member Ann Siemer. As I sat on the subway, I found myself staring at an advertisement for what I finally concluded was a pawnbroker. The grinning man was dressed up in an Uncle Sam costume -- all red, white, and blue and patriotic looking. He had his hands thrust outward toward the camera, with money in one hand and jewelry in the other, including what looked to be a large cross on a chain. The text invited people to dial a certain telephone number for the chance to win \$1500. Oh! I found this ad so offensive on many levels, including his use of patriotic and religious imagery. But chiefly I was offended to think of the poor people whose houses this man was going to be devouring in his small way.

And were the wild mortgage lenders in recent years any better? Are the state lotteries any better? Carol drove me up to White Plains yesterday for a theology publishing board meeting, and I noticed a billboard asking "Why Atlantic City when Yonkers is nearby." It was an ad for a casino. I am a man of right fair financial discipline and so maybe I am being too hard on these folks, but to me, lotteries and casinos look like the greedy scribes Jesus speaks of in today's lesson. They are devouring widows' houses. An economist or a philosopher or plenty of folks smarter than me might be able to explain why lotteries and casinos are good things, how the profits are put to benevolent purposes and so on. But in my present mind, such things appear to be greedy people devouring widows' houses. And I figure they'll take the rich person's house too if they can get it.

So, that case seems pretty easy to me. Do not devour widows' houses. Especially do not use a sacred office to pretend to be godly while all the time you are hurting the weak. I once read a sermon by the old Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon addressed to students in his preacher's college¹. He warned his students that if they were meaning to go to hell, they had best go fair and square as a "thief, blasphemer, or a murderer, rather than as an unfaithful steward to the Lord Jesus." I think Spurgeon is on to something. It accords with our Lord's saying about the millstone:

And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea. (Mark 9:42, KJV)

So much, then, for the hypocritical scribe. He should repent and mend his ways. This includes not only clergy, but also mothers and fathers, teachers, police, and judges. If you occupy an office in which the little ones of this earth are entrusted to you, do not devour them.

Next, let us consider the widow. She is the reverse of the hypocritical scribe. She does not seem to be gathering praise for herself because, after all, her offering to the Temple is very modest. No one looking on is likely to be impressed by her contribution of a penny. It is a humble amount, but it is radiant with beauty, for she gives it with a pure heart and in simplicity. She drops in her coin and walks away. No one knows the true splendor and magnitude of her gift. No one, that is, but Jesus.

And that is the good point. Jesus *observed* the woman. In the mighty temple in Jerusalem, there were doubtless many wonderful things to catch the eye. In fact, in the next chapter of St. Mark, we read that one of the disciples was awfully impressed by the grandeur of the Temple:

And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" (Mark 13:1, RSV)

But the eyes of Jesus pass right on over those glorious things. Instead, he regards the widow and her quiet offering. This is the divine trait - this tender regard of the Lord for the lowly - about which Mary sings in her Magnificat:

⁴⁶And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. (Luke 1:46-48a)

It is also the divine trait praised by David in Psalm 138:

¹ Charles Spurgeon, "To the Annual Conference of the Pastors' College Association, 1887."

⁶For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he knows from afar. (Psalm 138: 6, RSV)

If the Presidential motorcade passes by in our town, many of us would look to see the great man inside. But I get the feeling that Jesus would be gazing at the Secret Service agent willing to take a bullet rather than that the great man should. In fact, I get the feeling that Jesus would be looking most intently not at the motorcade, but at the hot dog salesman in his little booth trying to keep body and soul together and put some bread on his family's table.

It is part of the joy of Carol's position at The Wartburg that she is privileged to see many deeds similar to that of the widow in today's story. She sees the elderly husband making his way with his cane every day to visit the wife who no longer even knows him. She sees the nursing aids emptying the bed pans and encouraging the old folks. She sees countless quiet deeds of compassion. Well, a great thing about today's Gospel story is simply to say that God sees them too. The good deeds that are often overlooked here on earth are regarded and cherished by heaven.

You have no doubt noticed that in this morning's worship folder we have a brochure and an envelope for the Salvation Army. This is in preparation for next Sunday's Temple Talk by one of the officers of the Salvation Army. They are trying to raise extra funding for the sake of the poor and the unemployed in our town. They fear that these tough economic times are going to *continue* and they know that many people are already exhausted, of resources and sometimes even of hope.

I like the Salvation Army and hope that you will support this cause if you can because they seem to be the reverse of the scribe. They do not devour the widow's house, but try to let her keep her house.

Finally, let us consider the main character in this Gospel reading: I mean, our Lord Jesus. In St. Mark's Gospel, the story of Jesus is nearing its end. His days of freedom are about done. Soon he will be arrested and killed. From this perspective, the great thing about the story of the widow and her penny is that she is what is called a "type" for Christ. That is, she illustrates in her own life a Christ-like trait. She gives us a living picture of what Jesus is about to do. Just as the widow surrenders everything to God, "her whole substance," so Jesus is about to surrender everything to his heavenly Father that by whatever means, you and I might have hope of eternity. She drops her last penny into the temple treasury and walks away. Jesus drops his whole substance, his very life, into the grave and dies that you and I might have some hope in this world.

This is the glorious thing about Jesus of which St. Paul writes in Second Corinthians Chapter 8:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Cor. 8:9, RSV)

We are talking about a new scale of things. In the story of the Widow's Mite and in the story of Jesus, we are invited to a new way of life -- a manner of life in which quiet good deeds are sung about in heaven and in which loud deeds of hypocrisy are seen for what they are and thereby dismissed as worthless.

What seems good and right and lovely to Jesus is what is good, right, and lovely for you and me too. And in the end, we will be saved by these gracious labors of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.