

After all the traveling around the countryside and villages of his native Galilee Jesus has arrived at last in Jerusalem. He has taught his disciples, and the crowds that followed him, in village synagogues. He's taught them on the road as they traveled. He's taught them on the mountainside, and by the sea.

And now they are in Jerusalem, at the seat and center of the political, social, business, and religious life of the Hebrew people. Now he is teaching his disciples in the Temple.

The story that we have before us today from Mark's gospel is one that is, I believe, frequently misunderstood and frequently mis-used by the church. This is not the best-stewardship-story-every-told, assigned by the lectionary to be read during the fall stewardship campaign as an easy way to guilt people into giving the church their last two pennies.

I don't think that Jesus is pointing out the widow in this story as a glorious example, encouraging everyone to give money to the church.

As we've followed Jesus on his journey from the Galilee to Jerusalem this past year, he has *not once* taught his disciples or the crowds that listened to him anything even remotely like this.

Jesus did invite the rich young ruler to give away *everything* – because it was precisely *everything* that was creating a barrier between that young man and God.

As we reflect on the entire sweep of the story that Mark has unfolded to us so far, and especially when we consider both parts of the lesson from today's reading, I don't hear a glorification of the widow's generosity. I hear a lament by Jesus upon the corruption of the leadership of the Temple.

The first lesson that Jesus gives his disciples when they arrive in the Temple is a lesson concerning the temptation about which religious leaders must always be aware.

You need to be very careful, Jesus told them. Be careful, and be watchful, because some of your religious leaders are hypocrites. They walk around in their tailor-made suits and rolex watches. They like to be accepted into the places of economic and political power. They especially like private meetings with the President. And they really like to be seen sitting with the First Lady during the State of the Union address.

They are able to buy their expensive suits, and their expensive jewelry, and fly in their private jets because they take money from those least able to share.

That doesn't exactly sound like Mark is giving us the set-up for a stewardship sermon! It sounds more like a warning to those of us in religious leadership that we must be very, very careful not to practice our faith in a shallow way. That we must not treat our calling as pastors and priests and lay leaders and members in our faith communities as a cover-up for an insincere heart.

When we hear the story about the widow and her extraordinary gift in light of the warning by Jesus about hypocritical leadership I think we begin to hear a different lesson.

This isn't a lesson about the glories of *sacrificial giving*. I don't think that Mark is telling us that it is a wonderful thing that the widow gave her last dime to the Temple.

It might have been true – but that doesn't necessarily mean it was a good thing. Watching this faithful and devout woman make her gift, Jesus told his disciples

You see the religious leaders prancing around in their fine robes. You see the wealthy give out of their abundance. And I want you to pay attention to that poor widow over there. She's got almost nothing – and she's giving all of that. She just dropped into the plate everything she had to live on.

Do you notice, that Mark does not record Jesus as saying – *and you, and everyone who follows me, should all go and do likewise.*

I don't think that Mark is providing us with an endorsement of the concept of sacrificial giving. If anything – the Temple authorities should have been taking *care of* this poor widow, rather than *taking from* her.

This is a fascinating lesson from scripture to have before us. Just at that time of the year when we are asked to consider our support and gifts toward our life and ministry here, we have this lesson.

A lesson about the dangers of giving to a religious system gone wrong. Our gifts should not be about the 'needs of the system.' Our gifts should be about the response that we make to God – not a response to the church.

But our response to God must be a response that touches every aspect of our lives. And for many of us, that includes our money.

You will never hear me teach or preach about sacrificial giving. The idea that you should "give until it hurts" is simply wrong.

You also won't hear me preach the prosperity gospel. This is a view of the world that would suggest that the more you give to the church – or to your favorite televangelist – the more that God will give you. I lived with that theological view of the world many years ago when I was associated with the ministry of Oral Roberts. Oral called it 'seed faith living.' Plant a seed – with me, Oral would say – and God will meet your need.

If you're having trouble paying your bills, if you're having trouble in your marriage, if you're having trouble with your knee or your hip, then you just need to practice seed faith giving. Give out of your need, the story goes. Well – that's the story that drove me off campus, and into the arms of the Episcopal Church down the street.

In these next few weeks, as each of us are asked to consider our gift of financial support towards this corner of the Kingdom of God, please, please, please do not go down the path of sacrificial giving. If you are like the widow in today's Gospel, and only have two pennies to rub together, please keep them. Take care of yourself first. Take care of your children first. Take care of your elderly parents first.

And please don't think that the more you give the church, the more that God will give you.

Over the next month, our challenge will be to consider where we are in our journey of transformation toward God. ***Our journey towards God is meant to be a journey of transformation.***

We've chosen to experience a portion of that journey together. Our lives are transformed each time we pray, and each time we welcome a stranger. Our lives are transformed each time we sing, and each time we help a child understand that God loves him or her. Day by day, year by year, as our relationship with God grows and matures, our lives will continually be transformed. In the society and culture in which we live today, this transformation should include our relationship with money.

But today's lesson provides a clear warning – The life of the institution of the parish must not become a substitute for the transformation that is necessary in our own lives.

We have wonderful and life-giving ministries that support children and youth. We have magnificent music that enhances our worship and is a gift to the entire region. We both practice and support outreach ministries that help others to change their lives. *None of those things are a reason for anyone to give a penny to the parish.*

The "needs" of the parish must not drive your desire for personal transformation. We must each prayerfully consider our response to God's offer of transformation -

All things come of thee, O Lord; and of thine own have we given thee.