

“THE BEST SEATS”

MARK 12: 38-44

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University Church of Chicago

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A man was walking along a perilous path and stumbled into a deep well and plummeted hundreds of feet before grasping a spindly root, stopping his fall. His grip grew weaker and weaker and in his desperation he cried out, “Is anybody up there?”

He looked up, and all he could see was a circle of sky. Suddenly the clouds parted and a beam of bright light shone down on him. A deep voice thundered, “I, the Lord, am here. Let go of the root and I will save you.”

The man thought for a moment and then yelled, “Is there anybody else up there?”

When I consider today’s Gospel lection, I remember that joke. This is stewardship season, and at first glance the story of the widow’s mite gives the preacher an easy entrée into imploring you all to make generous gifts to God through University Church. Notice: I did not say anything about pledging to the budget. That’s not what stewardship is about.

Still, the reality is that the institutional life of the church depends on your pledge and mine. And so at first glance, to the delight of the preacher, the ecumenical lectionary offers up a soft pitch with this story—one that any preacher worth her or his salt can knock out of the park. The preacher can be the Chase Utley of homiletics with the story of the widow’s mite. Right? Wrong.

Indeed the whole fall stewardship campaign that many congregations conduct in October and November is not unlike the role of the treasury at the Temple in Jerusalem. That treasury was there to underwrite the religious apparatus of that day, just as most stewardship programs are designed to do in our day. And as is true in our churches today, there in Jerusalem at the Temple it was the rich donors who were crucial. So in trying to invite you all to give to the church, I face the challenge of how to do that, especially when Jesus does not lift up for praise those who give “out of their abundance.”

But there is a deeper problem in the story. Does Jesus point to the poor widow who gives her last two coins to the Temple as a model for giving? Or does Jesus point to her because she is a tragic example of how religious institutions suck the life out of people?

Well, if I follow that train of thought, the Stewardship Committee and the Governing Board are not going to be happy, are they? On the other hand, if I preach a sermon that points to the promise that the

days are numbered for religious regimes that exist for their own well-being, the powers-that-be are not going to be rejoicing either.

So, if I decide that Jesus points out this widow as a model for giving, then a key detail must be noted: Jesus calls his disciples to notice that this widow gives all she has—literally, “the whole of her life” (Mark 12:44). Moreover, this is the last scene in Jesus’ public ministry. From here all that remains in Mark’s telling is the Temple discourse and the Passion narrative. So this widow offers a glimpse into what Jesus is about. He is on the way to giving “the whole of his life” for something that is corrupt and condemned, all of humanity, the whole world.

*The Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church, USA*, declares that “the church is called to be a sign in and for the world of the new reality which God has made available to people in Jesus Christ.” And the way the church does this is by

“healing and reconciling and binding up wounds...ministering to the needs of the poor, the sick, the lonely, and the powerless...engaging in the struggle to free people from sin, fear, oppression, hunger, and injustice...giving itself and its substance to the service of those who suffer...sharing with Christ in the establishing of his just, peaceable and loving rule in the world. The Church is called to undertake this mission *even at the risk of losing its life.*”

Shortly after I left home to enter the University of Arkansas, my parents moved to a town with a population of about ten thousand oil field workers, pecan growers, merchants and the usual assortment of Baptists, Methodists and Pentecostals. Bristow, Oklahoma sits about thirty miles west of Tulsa; it has one main drag and the usual assortment of fast-food places, small shops and automobile dealerships. My folks didn’t tell me they were moving, and it took me several months to locate them in their new residence. (Does that tell you anything about the dysfunctional nature of our family?)

When I began to visit them periodically, my mother would take me up to the highest hill in Bristow on which sat a huge mansion that commanded a view of the town and the surrounding countryside. Mom had become good friends with Martha Washington Jones, the matriarch of that huge edifice and the most powerful woman in the local Methodist church. Ms. Jones was a gentle, well-respected woman.

Her husband, Robert E. Lee Jones, was a different story. The nicest thing one could say about REL Jones was that he was an entrepreneur, a shrewd businessman who had made millions of dollars in the Oklahoma oil fields. Truth to tell: he was an old-fashioned, mean-spirited, conniving wildcatter who had bilked hundreds of Oklahoma farmers out of the mineral rights to their land and had scared off most of his competitors in the oil business with bribes, threats and calumny.

One day around 1950 someone had taken a shot at Mr. Jones as he ascended the hill to his mansion. From that day on, he never left the house except to go out to the barn to look at his quarter horses or to admire the hundreds of peacocks that quawkily surrounded the house. He built a two-story library on to the first-floor of the mansion and surrounded himself with books. Floor to ceiling, piled up on the carpet, surrounding the huge chair in which he sat and read.

When Mr. Jones learned about my love of books and reading, he insisted that I come and spend evenings with him whenever I was in Bristow. Other than his son-in-law I was the only person who was permitted into his library. He taught me much about literature and history and geology. He told me always to write my name on the inside cover of each book in my library—not on a page that could be torn out by a book thief. “A book is a precious thing, a gift from God and the ages,” he would admonish me, “and you must take good care of it.”

Whenever I purchase a new book and carefully write my name on the inside front cover, I think of Robert E. Lee Jones—that isolated, curmudgeonly, difficult, auto-didact who had no friends and lived in constant fear of death. He was powerful yet pitiable, rich yet poor in spirit, able if he wanted to travel the world but living in self-imposed exile.

In this incident in the Temple, Jesus is not simply praising the woman for giving her all. He is contrasting her gift with the gifts of the well-to-do, the hypocrites (in Greek the word means “those who wear masks”) who have much but give little.

In William Faulkner’s novel *Light in August* the preacher, the Reverend Gail Hightower had one sermon and he preached it over and over again in First Presbyterian Church in the mythical town of Jefferson, Mississippi. The sermon was about his heroic grandfather who, according to the Reverend Hightower, had fought valiantly in the Civil War at the Battle of Corinth and had been killed at the hands of the Yankees. Gail Hightower was one of those people like so many in the church who live in the past and do so with faulty memories. The truth was that Hightower’s grandfather did not die valiantly in battle in 1862 but had been shot while stealing chickens. The good Presbyterians finally tired of hearing the same sermon week after week and fired the good reverend who lived in virtual exile in his home on the edge of town—until, at the conclusion of the novel he commits an act of heroism so profound that he redeems himself and almost saves the town of Jefferson from its racism.

Well, if a preacher does only have one sermon, one idea, then it should be based on the theme of sacrifice. If preachers have only one sermon on which we preacher variations week after week, at the same time we have a handful of stories, anecdotes and parables upon which we call—what Martin Luther King, Jr., called “set pieces.” I never know which of these really happened or whether they were just made up by some inventive pulpiteer. One of those very old tales recounts a customer who went into a jewelry store to buy a cross necklace. The clerk asked, “Do you want a plain cross or do you want one with a little man hanging on it?”

We know the answer to that question, don’t we? We want the plain one. We do not want a cross that’s loaded with real-life suffering, with sacrifice and self-denial.

The world’s favorite symbol is not the cross, not about sacrifice. The world’s favorite symbol is the ladder—which tells us that we should climb over others, keep moving, keep advancing, keep going higher and higher toward ultimate wealth and success and fame. The only ladder in the Bible is Jacob’s Ladder, and it is about angels and hope and self-denial. It’s about God’s vision, about the mission to which even wily, crooked old Jacob is called.

Jesus sits at the treasury and watches the crowd putting money into the treasury. “Many rich people put in large sums,” Mark asserts (v. 41). Then a poor widow comes and puts in “two small copper coins, which are worth a penny” (v. 42). Jesus makes sure that his disciples get the point: “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” (vv. 43-44).

Faith in God always expresses itself as faithfulness. The widow’s offering demonstrates her total trust in God. Her faith surpasses that of the religious leaders whose faith is a sham. Her trust in God is aligned with Jesus’ trust .

Several friends have forwarded a piece to me from the Op-Ed page of the October 28 *New York Times* by my friend Gordon Marino, professor of philosophy and director of the Hong/Kierkegaard Library at St. Olaf College. Dr. Marino is a renaissance man who is also a boxing trainer who covers boxing for the *Wall Street Journal* and is working on a book on boxing and philosophy.

In the recent *Times* article he wrote about Kierkegaard’s understanding of despair, which used to be classified as one of the Seven Deadly Sins but has now been medicalized and folded into the concept of clinical depression. “If Kierkegaard were on Facebook,” he wrote, “or could post a You Tube video, he would certainly complain that we, who have listened to Prozac, have become deaf to the ancient distinction between psychological and spiritual disorders, between depression and despair.”

A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity. Despair occurs when there is an imbalance in this synthesis. Too much of the expansive factor, of infinitude, and you have the dreamer who cannot make anything concrete. Too much of the limiting factor and you have the narrow-minded individual who cannot imagine anything more serious in life than bottom lines and spread sheets.

Existence precedes essence is the way Jean-Paul Sartre put it. By that he means that human beings have no predetermined essence the way, say, a coat-hanger does. We are indeterminate, always free to reinvent ourselves.

Clement of Alexandria once observed with his tongue planted firmly in his cheek that there is a certain similarity between our eternal “souls” and the “soles” of our feet. Each soul has a different size. Just as everyone gets a different “sole size,” so everyone gets a unique “soul size.” Possessions must fit the person—they will be cumbersome and uncomfortable if too large; painful if pinched. One soul might require tenderness while another needs a bit of upbraiding.

Our souls come alive when the soles of our feet put our faith out on the streets, when we live as humble, gracious followers of the One who never bragged or boasted but lived a simple, self-giving life.