

Three sons left home, went out on their own and prospered. Getting back together, they discussed the gifts that they were able to give to their elderly mother.

The first said: "I built a big house for our mother.

"The second said: "I sent her a Mercedes with a driver.

"The third said: "I've got you both beat. You know how much Mom enjoys the Bible and you know she can't see very well. So, I sent her a talking parrot that can recite the entire Bible.

It took twenty monks in a monastery twelve years to teach him. I had to pledge to contribute \$100,000 a year for twenty years. But it was well worth it. Mom just has to name the chapter and verse, and the parrot will recite it.

Soon thereafter, Mom sent out her letters of thanks. She wrote to the first son: "Milton, the house you built is too big. I live in only one room, but I have to clean the whole house.

"She wrote to the second son: "Marvin, I'm too old to travel. I stay home all the time, so I never use the Mercedes. And the driver is so rude.

"She wrote to the third son: "Dearest Melvin, you were the only son to have the good sense to know what your mother likes. The chicken was delicious."

Our sermon text this morning is also about a gift--a poor widow's gift to the Temple. It's taken from the gospel according to Mark 12:38-44.

38 *As [Jesus] taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, [the teachers of the law] 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!*

40 *They devour widows' houses///// they devour widows' houses///and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."*

41 *[Jesus] sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the*

*treasury. Many rich people put in large sums.*

42 *A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.*

43 *Then [Jesus] called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.*

44 *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.”*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Many use this story to encourage sacrificial giving. The poor widow gave everything she had to live on. The least we can do is give more. So, the preaching and teaching goes.

But, let me make a confession here: that interpretation of this story has always troubled me. Why? This story, as commonly interpreted, suggests this poor widow’s giving her “last two copper coins, which are worth a penny,” “everything she had, all she had to live on,” is a good thing.

Well, let me give you my two cents worth. And, can we get real with one another this morning?! We’d never ever suggest our Mom, our wife, our sister, our daughter, or anyone else we love to give her last two copper coins to the church. Would we?

Further, as far as I know, although there are some very faithful saints in this room this morning, none of us has ever given everything we had, all we had to live on, to the church.

And frankly, why would someone ever do that? So she has to depend on others or the church or the government to help her to eat? Well of course not.

Let’s take a look at the context of this story and see what I think this passage is really talking about. The story appears during Jesus’s last week here on earth. Within a few days, he’ll be arrested and then crucified. For Jesus and the rest of the Jewish community, the Temple in Jerusalem, where this story takes place, is arguably the most important place on earth.

The Temple had gathering places, columns, marble walls, and staircases. A woman such as this poor widow would have been allowed to go only as far as to the Court of Women in the Temple.

It contained the treasury, which is where Jesus saw her. And, this story happened during the festival of Passover, one of the most important and busiest times of the year at the Temple. For a faithful Jewish person, this was the place to be. But, what Jesus says here is a direct challenge to the pomp and circumstance he saw. He's critical of the Temple and the religious authorities there.

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receive the greater condemnation."*

Passover was the scribes' chance to really shine. And, Jesus was going to have no part of it.

Now, let's read the verses about the poor widow's gift again:

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44 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."*

Does Jesus actually say he's pleased with what has happened here? No, he doesn't. Instead, let me suggest we've added that part to the story. We think that, of course, Jesus would be pleased with one who gives everything to the Temple. Right?

But again, looking at the context of this story, just a few seconds before seeing the poor widow give her last two copper coins in the Temple, Jesus commented that the scribes "*devour*

*widows' houses[.]*" They devour the widow's houses by having them bankrupt themselves by putting all their money into the Temple treasury. And, right after he says that, he looks up and, what does he see?

He sees the poor widow giving her last two copper coins at the Temple. All she had to live on. Isn't that a perfect illustration of what he just said about the Temple leaders devouring the widow's houses?

I don't think Jesus is praising the woman's gift. I think he's instead lamenting it.

A modern day example of this might be the poor widow who attends a church I read about recently in which the church is asking for and spending over \$30 million dollars for a building to include, among other things, a grand entrance and a performing arts center.

In such an instance, and, according to how some interpret this scripture, any poor widow in that church is to give "everything she has, all she has to live on" so that her church can build their beautiful building.

Does today's scripture really mean to say that? Surely not. I know, as the one of the pastors here, I'd never encourage anyone to do what this woman did.

We do some wonderful marvelous things here at Triune. But still, it would never occur to me to try to convince anyone to give their last two copper coins, all they had to live on, to Triune.

And, woe to the TV preachers who become rich on the backs of the lonely, poor, disillusioned, diseased and desperate. Woe to the false teachers who stay in thousand dollar hotel rooms, fly around in private jets, and do it all in the name of Jesus Christ.

In Normandy during World War II, there were two soldiers who took their dead friend to be buried in a fenced cemetery.

They went to a church cemetery and asked the pastor for permission to bury him inside the

walls of the cemetery. And the pastor said, “Well, the rule is that you’ve got to be a member of the church. I just can’t allow it. I wish I could, but I just can’t allow it.”

And they begged him. They said, “It would mean so much to us to bury our friend inside the fence.”

“I’m so sorry,” the pastor said. “I just can’t allow it. But bury him outside the fence, just anywhere outside the fence. Just bury him wherever you like.”

The two soldiers reluctantly dug the grave, said a prayer, and buried their friend. The next day they were going to come back to put the grave marker in the ground.

They came back dutifully the next afternoon and walked up the side of the fence, and they looked to where they thought the grave had been dug, but there was no grave there.

And they walked all up and down the fence, and they couldn’t find where they’d dug the grave. But, they knew they’d dug it.

They walked all around the cemetery, all around that fence, and they couldn’t find it.

They went in to see the pastor and they said, “Pastor, forgive us. We were the ones who came yesterday.” And he said, “Oh, yes. I remember.”

They said, “Forgive us for bothering you, but we asked for permission to bury our friend inside the fence, and you said ‘Bury him outside.’ And we did, but we can’t find it. Are we lost? Where is the grave we dug? Do you know what might have happened to it?”

And the pastor said, “Oh, yes. I know what happened. I was so upset about your visit yesterday that I spent half the night worrying about what I said to you. And I spent the other half of the night moving the fence.”

Sisters and brothers, I’m so grateful to be a part of a moving-the-fence-and-coloring-outside-the-lines sort of church such as Triune.

One of the only churches I'm aware of in which everyone is really, truly, and wholly welcome.

Let me to take a quick detour and tell you what a true privilege it is to minister here, in this moving-the-fence-and-coloring- outside-the-lines place.

I've confessed to some of you I wear my heart on my sleeve. And, so when some of my sisters and brothers here share their stories of abuse and sleeping on the cold streets, and mental illness, and their struggles with addiction, and a host of other challenges, I oft times feel my emotions well up inside of me, and my eyes get moist. Again, what a privilege it is to serve Christ here in this place.

Let me take this detour a little further and tell you about something that happened to me recently when ministering here. I introduced myself to a man, I'll call Clayton.

I walked up to Clayton, wearing my mask, introduced myself as Jeff Brown, the interim associate pastor at Triune, and asked him to tell me his story.

He did. And he answered all my follow up questions and asked some of me. As we were wrapping up our conversation, he asked, "Now, what did you say your name is again?"

I said, "I'm Jeff Brown. I'm the interim associate pastor."

To which he started laughing. When I asked what was so funny, he said, "You said you're Jeff Brown, the interim associate pastor. Hearing you through your mask, I thought you said, 'I'm Jeff Brown, the sociopath.'"

Back to this morning's scripture. I want to say one more thing about putting the story of the poor widow in context. Let's look briefly at the story that immediately follows this one.

It's not about self-sacrifice. Instead it's about the destruction of the Temple.

Listen to Mark 13:1-2:

1 *As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!”*

2 *Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”*

So, the poor widow gave all she had to live on to the Temple, and the Temple was destroyed. How sad.

I’m afraid when we turn this story of the poor widow into nothing more than a simple message about our giving, we turn our attention away from the widow’s dire situation and start concerning ourselves with the question, “Are we giving enough?”

From my reading of this passage, however, we’re to pay less attention to whether we’ll be recognized as being seen as generous.

After all, that is what the scribes were trying to do. To show how generous they were.

Instead, let me encourage you to turn your attention away from your own generosity, and whether others will think you’re giving enough, and turn it towards worrying about the poor and how they’re sometimes exploited and mistreated.

Her name was Betty. She was a missionary. In a village in Africa. In the church she served, one of the poor women in the village had contracted AIDS. This was in the late 1980s when having AIDS was almost always a death sentence to the ones who had it.

The woman had a child—born several months premature. It had also contracted AIDS. The woman was in the hospital there. For several months. The baby, too.

In the hospitals in that village, it was up to the patient’s family to take care of her daily needs. To feed her. To bathe her. To do all of those necessary things.

But her family didn’t do it. They refused to do it. They neglected her. They turned their

backs on her. So, Betty took on those tasks and took care of the woman and her baby. She did what the family was supposed to do. Daily. For several months.

In time, the woman died. Betty took care of her funeral arrangements. And, buried her. After the woman died, Betty continued, daily, taking care of the woman's baby. In time, the baby died, too. Betty purchased some dolls clothes to dress the little baby for its funeral and burial.

After the baby's burial, Betty was exhausted. She was totally exhausted. And, she said to herself, "If I can just get home, put my feet up for a while, and rest for a few days, I think I'll be OK." So, she started walking toward home. But, as she rounded the corner of the street she lived on, she could see her yard. It was chock full of her African neighbors.

"God," she said, "I'm so tired. I can't do another thing." But, she did. She walked into her yard and welcomed her guests. And, she found out they were all from the woman's family whom Betty had taken care of for all those months.

Betty invited them in and offered them refreshments and drinks. They made small talk. After they'd talked a little while, there was a long silence. And then the man who was the leader of the group spoke up and said:

"We've watched you these last several months. You took care of one of our family members and her child. We were supposed to do that. But, we didn't. You did what we were supposed to do. We've never seen love like that before. Would you teach us to love like that?"

Sisters and brothers, this church stands in the gap for those who sometimes have no one else to turn their time of desperate need. This place of grace, this place of love and mercy, takes up and takes care of hundred of folks who depend on us.

Triune will not give up, give out, or give in when it comes to serving our community for Christ. No, we're not a take-your-last-two-copper-coins sort of church. Instead, may we be always



be known as the-moving-fences-and-coloring-outside-the-lines-we've-never-seen- love-like-that church of Greenville.

That is my sincere hope and heartfelt prayer for us all. May it be yours, too.

**THIS IS THE GOSPEL.**

**THIS IS THE GOOD NEWS.**

**AND, IT IS TRUE.**

**THANKS BE TO GOD.**

**AMEN.**