

November 10, 2024
Mark 12:38-42

Pentecost 25
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The One to Watch”

“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who were contributing to the treasury.”

Bomberger Hall is the oldest academic building on the campus of Ursinus College, the school where I earned my undergraduate degree. It is named after John H.A. Bomberger, who founded the school in 1869. The main assembly hall in the building is used for lectures, concerts, assemblies, and the annual Founders’ Day celebration. When you are sitting in the audience in Bomberger Hall, you immediately notice two large portraits flanking the stage: a portrait of John Bomberger on the left, and a portrait of Robert Patterson on the right. The football field at Ursinus is also named after Patterson, but otherwise little is said of him in the school’s history. One day, as we were sitting in Bomberger Hall before a class lecture, someone asked about the identity of the two persons whose portraits were staring back at us. The question was answered when another class member explained that “the one on the left founded the school; the one on the right put up the money.” It turns out that Robert Patterson was a major benefactor of the school in its early days, responsible for the construction of its earliest buildings and funding the school as it was getting established. Patterson is one of many generous benefactors whose name graces other buildings on campus and who are remembered and acknowledged for their generous support of the school that is now one of the most prominent small universities in the USA.

Major benefactors play an important role in any fundraising campaign. When a school, hospital, or theatre begins a new construction project, major donors are approached to give large donations that will hopefully spark others to add their own donations for the cause. When a charity is fundraising for a campaign or establishing an endowment fund, one of the first tasks is to identify donors who have the financial means to make generous contributions to these campaigns. If you have ever watched a program on PBS, the major donors who support the programs on public television are always acknowledged. While fundraisers will often note that “no contribution is too small,” it is the persons who make significant financial contributions who are remembered by name on buildings, acknowledged in programs, and thanked publicly for the funds they donate to a charity or institution.

The importance of generous donors whose significant financial contributions are sought after and publicly acknowledged is at the center of today's Gospel lesson, where Jesus finds himself sitting outside of the Temple treasury in Jerusalem and watching as persons bring their tithes and donations to support the place where the people of Israel gathered to worship the Lord. This comes at a significant point in Mark's Gospel, occurring during Holy Week between Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and his Last Supper on Maundy Thursday and his crucifixion on Good Friday. During these "days in between," Jesus continues to teach in the Holy City, which include a warning to his audience about a group of religious leaders known as "scribes," who are frequently depicted along with the Pharisees as opponents of Jesus and his teaching. Jesus has previously criticized the scribes for failing to understand David's prophecy about the Messiah ("*David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared, 'The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.''"*" – Mark 12:36, Psalm 110:1); he also warned his disciples to watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod ("*Watch out – beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.*" – 8:15). Now Jesus warns the crowd to watch out for the scribes, who are depicted as loving religious show and honours: "*Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets!*" (12:38-39). This depiction of the scribes could be seen as normal privileges of aristocracy in a traditional society: wearing ornate clothing, being recognized and greeted when they go out in public, having the best seats in public gatherings, and indulging in elaborate banquets; it is also the way that Jesus describes the rich man in his parable in which a poor man named Lazarus lies starving at the gate while the rich man "*was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day*" (Luke 16:19). Such behavior is also critiqued in the letter of James:

- "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'have a seat here, please,' while to the one who is poor you say, 'stand here,' or 'sit at my feet,' have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?" – James 2:1-4.

The real issue that Jesus focuses on in his judgment of the scribes' behaviour is how they acquired the wealth that allows them to dress in ornate robes and feast on sumptuous food: "*They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation*" (12:40). This accusation

suggests that they may have accepted hospitality from widows under the presence of piety to support their tastes for wealth and power. Jesus has consistently warned his disciples against seeking honour rather than serving others (*“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all”* – 9:35). The ugliness of the greed of the scribes is compounded by the hypocrisy of trying to hide their avarice behind ostentatious piety; they are exposed by Jesus as *“a posturing, wealthy aristocracy that has no concern for the people”* (Pheme Perkins), greed and selfishness makes in the vestments of religious learning and vestments.

Following his public condemnation of the hypocrisy of the scribes, Jesus *‘sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury.’* (12:41). The Temple treasury was the receptacle for collecting the Temple taxes and freewill offerings. At first, he notices that *“many rich people put in large sums,”* public displays of generosity that were undoubtedly acknowledged and applauded by both the Temple authorities and the crowds. But unlike those who give recognition and honour to these generous donors, Jesus says nothing. What he does notice is a person who was unnoticed by everyone but our Lord: *“A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.”* (12:42). It is at this point that Jesus gets up, calls his disciples together, and teaches them that *“truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who contributed to the treasury”* (12:43). Of course, Jesus is not speaking of the monetary value of the gifts, since the amounts contributed by the wealthy benefactors was far greater than the widow’s meager contribution of two small coins. What Jesus is addressing is the gap between the wealthy persons’ gifts and the widow’s offering: whereas the wealthy gave from their surplus, the widow gave her whole livelihood: *“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”* (12:44). Jesus’ praise of the widow does not imply that Jesus approves of the social conditions that have created her poverty. The condemnation of the scribes whose taste for wealth and ostentation is linked to their devouring widows’ houses must not be forgotten.

- “The contrast between her offering and all the others who are tossing in what they can spare exhibits the false values of a society that does not really offer sacrifice to God. Jesus has already told his disciples that persons must be willing to renounce their own desires, take up the cross, and become slaves of all in order to follow him. The widow’s story can be read as an anticipation of Jesus’ own sacrifice of his life.” – Perkins.

The story of the “widow’s mite” is often seen as a model of sacrificial giving, with the widow being a model disciple while the scribes are condemned for their false

piety and greed. But there is something else about her that catches Jesus' attention, a reminder that this episode takes place on Tuesday of Holy Week, within hours of his own sacrifice of all that he possesses. The importance of Jesus' teaching emerges when we read it as an overture to Jesus' passion. Her gift foreshadows the gift that Jesus is about to offer: his very life. The poor widow becomes a type of him who, *"though he was rich, yet for our sake became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich"* (2 Corinthians 8:9).

- "If you ask me, that is why he noticed the poor widow in the first place. She reminded him of someone. It was the end for her; it was the end for him, too. She gave her living to a corrupt church; he was about to give his life for a corrupt world. She withheld nothing from God; neither did he. It took one to know one. When he looked at her it was like looking in a mirror at a reflection so clear that he called his disciples over to see. "Look," he said to those who meant to follow him, 'That is what I have been talking about. Look at her.'" – Barbara Brown Taylor.

The poor widow is lifted up by Jesus as one who gives all that she has for the sake of others. She is an example of the way Jesus will liberate his people from their bondage to sin and the power of death; as Luther teaches in the *Small Catechism*, our Lord Jesus Christ has *"purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death."* As our Lord taught his disciples that *"if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."* (8:34), Jesus points to the poor widow as an example of one who gives all that she has for the sake of others, a person who trusts in God to use her gift as a means of blessing for all God's people.

- "The widow is a model for all disciples; the scribes serve as a warning to the crowd in general, but with special application to disciples who are leaders in the church ... Any form of ostentatious, hypocritical religion is the target of Jesus' solemn words of warning and the antithesis of the widow's wordless example." – Lamar Williamson, Jr.

There is nothing inherently wrong with wealthy persons giving large contributions to important causes; all the schools that I have attended have depended on generous benefactors for their establishment and continuing financial health. The mission of the Church of Jesus Christ depends on the faithful stewardship of persons who continually offer *"ourselves, our time, and our possessions"* so that the work of the Church might continue in this and future generations. Paul emphasized the importance of faithful stewardship in his second letter to the Corinthians, teaching

that “*each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver*” (2 Corinthians 9:7). Stewardship is at the heart of our lives as the people of God:

- “Similarly, stewardship must be understood first as descriptive of the being – the very life – of God’s people. Deeds of stewardship arise out of the being of the steward ... Real and effective deeds of stewardship will occur only when persons hear that gospel and are moved by that Spirit that changes their being, lifting them from the sloth of irresponsibility or judging their pride of mastery and giving them new being – the being of stewards.” – Douglas John Hall.

As I look back on my university years and the ways in which my education has been a blessing to me for decades, I am thankful for the contributions of both John Bomberger and Robert Patterson, who founded the school and made certain that it had the funds necessary for its establishment and growth. I am thankful to the many faithful Lutheran ancestors who established and endowed my seminary so that I was able to be trained to serve the church as a minister of Word and Sacrament for these many years. I am thankful to generous donors who have given of their abundance to fund important institutions and causes that benefit our communities and nation. The message of today’s Gospel is not meant to condemn such wealthy benefactors whose generosity is a blessing to many people and communities; but as we focus on these major acts of giving, we must not allow ourselves to not notice those whose more humble acts offer examples for all of us on how we can be faithful stewards of what our Lord has entrusted to us. As Jesus lifts up the poor widow as the one to watch because of her selfless giving of herself as Jesus gave his very life for the sake of others, may our response to the message of the Cross be one in which we realize that this “*love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.*”

Amen.