

Going for Broke  
Sermon on Mark 12:41-44 Preached at Highland Park UMC  
Sunday, November 12, 2006

You know the story of the Wicked Witch of the West, but do you know the story of Hetty Green, “the Wicked Witch of Wall Street?” Hetty was born to wealthy parents, and upon turning 21 she inherited \$7.5 million. That isn’t pocket change today, but she inherited that \$7.5 million in the 1850s! When her father died in 1865, Hetty inherited his estate, rumored to be worth over \$100 million. Despite this incredible fortune, Hetty Green lived as though she were destitute. At her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party Hetty refused to light the candles on her cake because she didn’t want to waste them. She wrote checks on scraps of paper instead of using blank forms. She bought secondhand clothes and when a dress got soiled, she washed only the part that was dirty in order to make the garment last longer. She never washed her underwear for the same reason. For meals she ate onions or dined in “Pie Alley” where the main meal of the day cost just fifteen cents. She moved constantly in order to avoid paying property taxes and often left bills unpaid. Even when her young son Ned fell and broke his leg, Hetty refused to take him to a doctor, fearing that she would be overcharged for the treatment. Upon her death in 1916, the widow Hetty Green did not own a home, leaving the state of New York unable to establish residency and thus to collect taxes. Hetty Green died with her estate—valued at over \$100 million in cash, stocks, bonds, and real estate—completely intact.<sup>1</sup>

How very different is the widow Jesus observed contributing to the temple treasury! Unlike Hetty Green who lived in imaginary poverty, this widow lived in actual poverty. Unlike Hetty Green who had amassed a vast fortune, this widow had but a few small coins. Unlike Hetty Green who displayed a miserly spirit, this widow showed a spirit of generosity.

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<sup>1</sup> From “Hetty Green: The ‘Wicked Witch of Wall Street’” in *The Good, the Bad, and the Mad: Some Weird People in American History* by E. Randall Floyd (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1999) 70-74.

This story of a simple woman's piety is told and retold. In a sense, it's a shame that the lectionary has held the story in reserve until this week, as it's just the kind of story that preachers find handy to pull out for the stewardship campaign. Look, the story seems to say. Look at this poor old woman, who freely and generously gave to the temple everything she had to live on. Shouldn't you give just the same way? Is this the point of the story: to guilt and shame us into emptying our bank accounts on behalf of the church budget, or at least increasing our percentage of giving? Or does the gift of the widow's mite point us to an even greater gift?

I confess that I initially approached this text confident that I knew exactly what it was about. After all, it's only four fairly short verses, and the main action as well as the main idea are repeated twice, which gives one a pretty good idea of what Jesus wanted to emphasize. Jesus was in the temple courts watching as people came in to put money into the temple's treasury. Many rich people came and made large cash contributions. A poor widow also came in, and when she made her offering, she put in two small copper coins, which were worth but a penny. Seeing this, Jesus called his disciples to him and offered an object lesson: "Truly I tell you, [he said] 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" (Mk. 12:43b-44).

Most commentators on this text, both ancient and modern, praise this woman. The ancient church fathers tend to commend her for her good intention and firm conviction. John Chrysostom remarked that Jesus praised the widow "for the wealth of her soul," saying "If you bring her intention into the light, you will see that her store of generosity defies description." Paulinus of Nola points to the widow as a woman of great personal devotion, saying that she "forgot herself in her concern for the poor and, thinking only of the life to come, gave away all

her means of subsistence.”<sup>2</sup> The Fathers call us as the church to give in the same way: with eagerness and good will, with the intention of doing the greatest possible good.

Modern commentators tend to follow in the same general line of thinking, but go a step further, noting that the woman gave away literally everything. Eduard Schweizer, for instance, says, “[T]his brief final story exalts that quiet, matter-of-course, and total giving which does not make a big fuss about the deed.” William Lane praises the widow’s “wholehearted devotion to God” whose gift represents her “total commitment to God.” Donald Juel remarks that “What sets the widow apart is not the size of her gift but its totality: She has put in everything she had.”<sup>3</sup> The lesson seems obvious, doesn’t it? Be like the widow. Give till it hurts. Give everything.

This may indeed be the lesson, the point, the moral of the story, but if it is, may I suggest that it is not for the reasons we typically think. Amidst all the praise and adulation for this woman’s generous act of self-sacrifice, at least one person has read the story and asked, Does this story say what I think it says? Many commentators point out that the text says the widow put in *two* coins and that this amounted to “everything she had, all she had to live on.” Morna Hooker, for instance, says that “the widow might, had she chosen, have made a gift to the temple without parting with her last coin: she was down to her last penny, but she could at least have divided it.”<sup>4</sup> What are we to make of this woman who gives her last penny to the temple? A Catholic commentator named Addison Wright says, “If any one of us were actually to see in real

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<sup>2</sup> John Chrysostom, *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God* 6.12 and Paulinus of Nola, *Letters* 34, 2-4 in Mark, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* II, ed. Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998) 170-171.

<sup>3</sup> Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark*, trans. Donald H. Madvig (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1970) 259; William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich. and Cambridge, England: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974) 442, 443; Donald H. Juel, *Mark*, *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1990) 173.

<sup>4</sup> Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: A&C Black, 1991) 296.

life a poor widow giving the very last of her money to religion, would we not judge the act to be repulsive and to be based on misguided piety because she would be neglecting her own needs?”<sup>5</sup> And has not recent church history shown how true this is? We have only to think of Robert Tilton and his “pay to pray” promises or Jim and Tammy Fay Bakker who sought financial contributions to build a Christian theme park. Countless other televangelists, faith healers, and so-called preachers of the Gospel prey on the poor and elderly for cash donations. If we accept the story of the widow’s mite uncritically and at face value, it seems as if Jesus is endorsing the kind of abuse of the poor at the hands of religious figures for which he condemned the scribes “who devour widows’ houses.”

And so we arrive at a dilemma: If we hear this story as an encouragement to give till it hurts, to give it all away, to empty our bank accounts and give it to the church, we run into the possibility of religious abuse. Certainly there were some people, like the rich young ruler, whom Jesus charged to “sell all they had and to give the proceeds to the poor” (cf. Mk. 10:17-22). On the other hand, we know that Jesus relied on certain wealthy individuals and their means to provide for him and his ministry (cf. Lk. 8:1-3). Here it is important to remember that “The Lord ... did not deny that the rich gave much; He merely said that the widow gave still more, for theirs was but a contribution, generous though it might be, while hers was a true sacrifice.”<sup>6</sup>

Here, I think, we get at the point of the story. This brief scene in the temple comes at the close of Jesus’ public ministry. Jesus will no longer instruct the crowds. There will be no more healings, nor exorcisms. Jesus will perform no more miracles. All that remains is for Jesus to embrace the fate that has been his from the beginning of the story: an encounter with the political

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<sup>5</sup> Addison G. Wright, S.S. “The Widow’s Mite: Praise or Lament?” which first appeared in 1982 in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44, now at <http://www.visionsofgiving.org/widowsmite.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> R. Alan Cole, *Mark*, 196.

and religious authorities that will culminate with his self-sacrificial death on the cross. Here in the temple precincts where Jesus had often taught, comes the final lesson.

Observe the widow, Jesus says, and consider her gift. “She 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.” The action of this woman in offering up everything she had points us to the action of God who offers us everything he has. By placing two small copper coins worth hardly a penny into the treasury, the widow gave her living, all she had to live on. By placing his one beloved son worth the whole world into humanity, God gave himself, his very life, to his people. The widow gave sacrificially. God gives to us sacrificially. In Jesus the Christ, God gives us all that God is and all that God has. In Jesus the Christ, God was going for broke, giving all of himself for us that we might give all of ourselves to him. In Jesus the Christ we have received the incredible riches of God’s love. Thanks be to God.