Sunday, November 10, 1991
THE WIDOW'S MITE
Mark 12:38-44

Some of the most memorable people in the Bible are those who remain anonymous. We do not know their names, but they are remembered because of something they did or were afraid to do. There's the woman who had been sick for 12 years and had spent most of what she had trying to get well. Then one day she met Jesus, touched the hem of his robe, and was healed. We don't know if she had a family or whether she was a young person or an older woman. All that we know is her life was changed.

A few weeks ago, the sermon was based on the story of an anonymous young man who came to Jesus and asked what he needed to do to find meaning in his life. He had already followed all of the religious rules. Jesus told him he lacked one thing. He needed to sell all he owned and give the money to the poor and then follow him. This young man went away sorrowful because he had many possessions and was not willing to part with them. He was not willing to pay the price to have a meaningful and abundant life.

Consider another memorable person, an anonymous widow. Again, we don't know her age, how long she had been married before her husband died, whether or not she had children or any other close family members. She is remembered in the New Testament only because of what she did and because Jesus used her as an example in his teaching. One day, when Jesus and his disciples were in Jerusalem and in the Temple area, Jesus sat down where he could watch people as they put money into the collection box for the support of the Temple and its many programs.

The collection box was in a public area so that anyone who watched could easily see how much money people were giving. No doubt, some people tried to impress those who might be observing by putting in a lot of coins. The story in Mark tells us that Jesus noticed some rich people who put in large sums of money, but he was not impressed. He knew they could afford much more. The person who really got his attention was a widow who put two small copper coins in the collection box.

This is an unusual story for two reasons: first, because the person Jesus used as an example for all of us was a woman and a widow; and second, because of the sacrificial nature of her giving. He frequently chose the least expected as a model for his followers.

There are several additional incidents in the New Testament where Jesus shows a special concern for women and widows. In so doing, he was going against the culture of his time. We know that the early church followed his example, and in so doing, they also were being counter-cultural. Biblical scholars remind us that in the culture of Jesus' day, widows were often discriminated against not only because they were women but even more so because they were widows.

Widows wore special black clothing so they could be easily recognized. A widow could not inherit from her husband upon his death. Being a widow meant not only bereavement but deprivation and often disgrace.

Burdened with the reproach of being a widow, a Hebrew woman also lost much of her authority and well-being in that society. The eldest son inherited his father's goods and took over the

management of the house. If the widow was childless, she usually returned to her father's house. If her father was not living, she had no place to go.

Added to this was the Hebrew law of levirate marriage, which held that a widow could be married to the next youngest unmarried brother of her husband so that she would continue to be supported by her husband's family. However, many times no brothers were available, or the brother might refuse to take on this responsibility. Then the widow was left without economic security. Overall, the status of the widow in the culture of those days revealed the bias of a patriarchal society where women were considered chattels and bearers of children, often something less than persons.

Widows were pre-eminently a disadvantaged group in the social circle of Jesus' day. Most of them were poor and at the mercy of society as a whole. Jesus, however, recognized their suffering as outcasts and responded to it as he responded to all those rejected by society or who suffered in any way.

We can now see why the widow in this particular instance in the Gospel of Mark made such an impression on Jesus. Here was a person who received so little from the society around her and yet was willing to give to the Temple beyond her means.

Thus, Jesus called attention to her joyful generosity in spite of the harsh conditions of her life. "This poor widow," Jesus said to his disciples, "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."

Does God want all the poor people in our country to give all they have to the church? No! Does God want those of us who have an abundance to give all we have and become poor? No! The first point that Jesus wanted to make in using this incident as a teaching story is that those who may seem to be giving the least are actually giving the most. Do not judge people by the amount they give unless you know the whole story. Mark quotes Jesus as saying: "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those 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."

We can make the mistake of evaluating our giving and the giving of others by the size of the gift rather than by the proportion. Those who have more are to give more. But it doesn't always happen that way. Furthermore, Jesus knew that some of those who put many large coins in the collection box at the Temple did so to impress others with the size of their gift. They knew people were watching. The poor widow gave with a different spirit and motivation. God is never impressed with the quantity of our giving, but with the proportion and with the spirit in which we give.

This incident was remembered and written down by the early church because it makes a second point: Jesus is watching as we make our pledge and give money for the support of the church in today's world. Listen again to verse 41: "Jesus sat down opposite the treasury and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury."

We tend to make a big issue about our giving to the church being a private and secret matter. We don't want anyone watching us, and that's okay, although we all know that one of the reasons for wanting to keep our giving to the church a secret sometimes is because our

proportionate giving is so small, and we are secretly ashamed of it because we know we could be giving more. We know it wouldn't impress anyone.

According to the teachings of Jesus, however, we are not to call attention to our giving when we do it to impress others.

Thus, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from God. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and God who sees in secret will reward you."

We can be sure that those who would be giving a very small amount proportionately would not be the ones to blow a trumpet to call attention to their gift.

According to Jesus, we should give enough so that we are not ashamed of our giving, but feel good about it. The Bible says, "God loves a cheerful giver." And if we are giving enough so that we feel good about it, then it's not necessary to call attention to it or brag about it. We already feel good about it. We have inner satisfaction. Furthermore, there are many people like the widow Jesus observed, who though their giving is small, is at the same time very large.

One of the books that has influenced my life very much, I read years ago as a teenager, and I've never forgotten it. The title is The Magnificent Obsession, by Lloyd Douglas. The book is still in print. I wish I could give a copy to each member and family in this congregation.

The main character in the book, as I remember it, is a physician named Dr. Hudson. One of the most surprising and helpful discoveries he makes in his spiritual journey is "you are your secrets."

Dr. Wayne Hudson is on the edge of failure and in deep depression following the death of his wife. He goes to a monument works to pick out a suitable marker for her grave. There, he encounters the eccentric but strangely talented sculptor, Clive Randolph. Sensing the Doctor's state of mind, Clive Randolph engages him in conversation, and gradually, as their friendship develops, Randolph imparts to Dr. Hudson a "secret" which can, he says, transform one's whole life, and as the story develops, it does this very thing for Dr. Hudson.

At no one place in the novel is the secret fully and explicitly stated, but when pieced together, it runs something like this: most of us live depleted existences, that is, our lives have a certain kind of emptiness. At times, we feel weak, lack zest, are apprehensive, pessimistic, afraid, even neurotic. And the reason is that when we perform a good deed, we advertise it, display it, let it be known in some way, and thus collect and enjoy the credit then and there. We want our reward immediately, and we get it to a certain extent.

But on the other hand, when we do something cheap, mean, dishonest, or wrong, something we're not proud of, we carefully hide and deny it if we can, with the result that the "credit" for this kind of action remains with us and accumulates; it builds up inside of us and can poison us. Thus, a person who follows such a style of life, and many of us do, even without being fully aware of it, is chronically bankrupt.

What then is the alternative? It is to reverse the whole strategy. We then admit, confess, and thus divest ourselves of our weaknesses, our errors, our sins, our jealousies, our fears, and doubts, and at the same time, we hide, keep secret, our good deeds, our virtues. In fact, we go out of our way to do more and more good deeds anonymously. We become cheerful givers. Instead of our sins and weaknesses becoming our innermost secrets, our good deeds become our innermost secrets. A new and powerful energy now begins to fill our lives.

In the story, doing more and more good deeds secretly becomes Dr. Hudson's magnificent obsession, and he becomes a different person. This brief synopsis of the story does not do it justice. I hope you will get this book from the library, or order it from a bookstore and read it. It's exciting and life-changing.

I believe the poor widow gave her gift in secret. Those who might have been watching would not have paid any attention to her. What could she afford to give? What difference would her small bit of money make? However, Jesus was watching. There are no secrets from God. Remember, Jesus said, "God, who sees what good you do in secret, will reward you." Amen.