Sunday, November 12, 2000
JESUS IS WATCHING
Mark 12:38-44

Some of the most memorable people in the Bible 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 used most of what she owned to try 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 we know is that her life was changed, and Jesus held her up as a positive example of faith in God.

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 the religious rules. Jesus told him he lacked one thing. He needed to sell all he owned, 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.

There's the unnamed Samaritan leper who was the only one of the ten lepers healed who came back to thank Jesus. And there's the unnamed Samaritan in the story of the "Good Samaritan," who helped the injured Jew in the ditch on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho.

Consider another memorable person, an anonymous widow. Again, we don't know her age, how long she had been married before her husband died, how long she had been a widow, whether or not she had children or any other close family members. She is remembered in the New Testament because of her joyful generosity, which Jesus happened to notice, and he then used her as a positive example in his teaching.

One day, when Jesus and his disciples were in the Temple area in Jerusalem, 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, there were some who tried to impress those who might be observing by putting in a lot of money.

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 individual Jesus used as an example to be followed was a woman and a widow, and second, because of the overwhelming generosity in her giving. He frequently chose the least expected and the lesser-known as models for all of us.

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 that way, also went against the culture.

In that day and age, widows were frequently 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. Contrary to what takes place today, 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 stigma of being a widow, a Hebrew woman also lost much of her authority and respect in that society. The eldest son inherited his father's property upon his father's death, and he took over the management of the house. If the widow had no children, 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 deceased 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 added responsibility. Then the widow was left without economic security.

Overall, the status of the widow in the society of those days revealed the bias of a patriarchal society where women were considered property and bearers of children, and often something less than human beings.

Widows were preeminently 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 in the same way as he paid special attention to all those rejected by society or who suffered in any way.

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

Jesus called attention to her joyful generosity in spite of the harsh conditions of her life. "This poor widow," he 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 church and in other churches to give all they have? No! Does God want all of us who have more than we need 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 might 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 the proportion. Those who have more are to give more. But it doesn't always happen that way. In fact, the highest proportionate givers in churches are almost always those who have the lowest incomes. Furthermore, Jesus knew that some of those who put larger coins in the collection box did so to impress others with the size of their gift. They waited until people were watching. The poor widow gave with a different spirit and motivation. God is never impressed with the quantity of our giving all by itself, but with the proportion and the spirit in which we give.

This incident was remembered and later 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 people putting money into the treasury." Try this: Each time the offering plate comes by, think of Jesus as sitting beside you and watching. Or, when you fill out your pledge card this week, imagine that Jesus is looking over your shoulder. There are no secrets with God.

We tend to make a big issue about our giving to the church being a private and secret matter. Most of us don't want anyone watching us, and that's okay. Although, there are those who don't want anyone to know what they are giving because their proportionate gift is so small and they are secretly ashamed of it. I also hope there are many of you who don't want anyone watching because your gift is so large and therefore you want it to be secret. You are not trying to impress anyone or draw attention to your gift.

This secrecy about money is part of a larger issue. I believe that we are often afraid to talk very much about money, especially in regard to our personal lives — how much we make, how much we spend, and how much we give away — because money is a symbol of power and status and, for some people, a symbol of self-worth. We tend to evaluate people's significance by how much money they make or have. We give money a power that it should not have. At times, our language betrays us. We ask about another person, "How much is she worth?" Talking about money openly is, for some, a forbidden subject because of its symbolic power.

Several years ago, "Dear Abby" received a letter that stated: "I am a 23-year-old liberated woman who has been taking the birth control pill for two years. It's getting pretty expensive, and I think my boyfriend should pay half the expense, but I don't know him well enough to discuss money with him."

This letter reveals a lot concerning what's going on in our culture. This couple believes they can have a romantic intimate relationship but yet cannot talk about money because they don't know each other well enough. Why the reluctance on the subject of money?

Many years ago, in St. Louis, I knew a married couple who could speak openly in front of their children on all kinds of subjects, but would go into the bedroom and close the door when they wanted to talk about money.

Yet in the New Testament, Jesus spoke about money more frequently than any other subject except the Kingdom of God. He gave an unusual amount of time and energy to the money issue.

That's because he knew that money is a potent spiritual reality and can have a power over us that needs to be broken. That's why Jesus said such things as: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." He knew how easy it is to worship money. He also said, "You cannot serve God and mammon." A good synonym for mammon is money.

Jesus taught that money has a power that can be used in good or bad ways. When the Bible refers to money as a power, it does not mean something vague or impersonal. It also means something more than "purchasing power," although that is included. According to Jesus and all

the writers of the New Testament, behind money are very real spiritual forces that can energize it and give it a life of its own. It is capable of inspiring devotion and worship. It can easily become our God.

It is the spiritual reality behind money that we want so badly to deny. We don't want to admit that money has a desire for omnipotence in our lives. It wants to control us. It is not willing to rest content in its proper place alongside other things we value. Money wants to be supreme, and in some people's lives, it is.

How can the seductive power of money over our lives be overcome? First, get in touch with your own feelings and emotions about money. Come to terms with your fear, insecurity, and guilt about money. Most of us are threatened to some degree by the subject of money. Talk about it as openly as possible within your family. Pray about it.

Second, to break the seductive power of money in your life, it helps to remember that everything we have comes from God. It is not really ours in the first place or the last place. In the book of Job in the Old Testament, when he had lost everything, he says, "The Lord gives, the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord." Maybe we need to stamp on everything we possess, "Given by God," or better still, "Owned by God."

Third, you can begin to overcome the seductive power and worship of money by becoming a regular and generous giver. Generous, regular, committed, and joyful giving has a way of dispelling the miserly tendencies within us. But it needs to be regular, committed, and joyful giving — not just giving from time to time when we happen to feel like it or when someone plays on our emotions.

Becoming a regular and joyful giver has a way of changing us for the better. Then instead of money having a power over our lives, it becomes a means of enhancing our relationship to God and with others. That's what Jesus meant when he said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Money as a form of power is so intimately related to the possessor that when you consistently give it away, you are also giving yourself away. Dr. Karl Menninger once asked a wealthy patient, "What on earth are you going to do with all that money?" The patient replied, "Just worry about it, I suppose." Dr. Menninger went on, "Do you get that much pleasure out of worrying about it?" "No," responded the patient, "but I get such terror when I think of giving some of it away."

This terror is real. When we let go and give, we are letting go of a part of ourselves and our false security. We are breaking the power of money over our lives. We begin moving from greed to generosity, and it changes us for the better. And remember above all, Jesus is watching. Amen.