

Mark 12: 38-44 Our Mite

From the title of this sermon and the presentation of today's gospel reading, you might make an assumption that the message is about one of two possible stories narrated by Mark. In most translations of Scripture, the translators insert subtitles between passages that are deemed to have differences in message, location or content. Despite most translations using subtitles to create a separation between verse 40 and 41, the lectionary combines them. This difference could be an indication to check to see if this division is justified. The original Greek documents did not have these divisions. Within our passage, Jesus is still located in the Temple courtyard. In Mark he has been there since the end of Chapter 11. When he re-entered the Temple that day, the religious authorities began questioning him. This continues until after the agreement of Jesus and the scribe about what commandment is first. Then no others from the gathered crowd are willing to step forward to question Jesus. Our passage skips a brief text where Jesus discusses the identification of the Messiah as the son of David. So the focus has become teaching about what subject or subjects Jesus wants to introduce. When we look at how our passage has been interpreted we can gain insight into the message and ourselves. There seem to be two approaches commonly used for this portion of the narrative. One approach is to take only the first portion. This often leads to an expositional warning about pride and self-serving behavior, about boasting and status seeking. If it is stewardship season for the congregation, the focus will be the later portion of this reading where the widow's contribution is observed and used as a model. These are often viewed as separate teachings so much so that only the specific portion of the text being discussed is even read. Yet when you look carefully at the narrative which Mark tells as a whole, the idea that these are joined in some manner emerges. Mark will often change physical location if there is a new or different teaching to be found in the narrative being given. Here Mark tells us that Jesus remains in the courtyard after the questioners depart. Jesus begins teaching the crowd which is still gathered around him, but Jesus is the one initiating the subject matter. But what Jesus is teaching does not take the expected form of a parable. Instead, it seems rooted in observations that Jesus is making about those walking around in the courtyard. Our opening verse is a warning to beware of the scribes. A casual reading might lead you to think this warning comes with a broad stroke to include all scribes. Because of the adversarial relationship between Jesus and the various groups in power, this criticism seems natural. The hypocrisy of the religious leaders is often pointed out in the narratives of Jesus' life and teachings. These elements are also found in this passage. Jesus is very specific in describing the particular behavior of the group of scribes he is pointing out to those listening to him. These scribes like to walk around in long robes. This dress sets them apart and makes them recognizable. They like to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces. They want to have the best seats in the synagogues as well as places of honor at banquets. In many ways this description is reminiscent of the request of James and John for privileged seating when Christ rules. Jesus reprimands them telling them that they must be servants of others to gain status in God's sight. But these scribes error contains an element that is worse than status seeking. It is more profound calling forth condemnation. Verse 40: "They devour widows' houses and then for the sake of appearance say long prayers." The Greek word used in this text for the scribes' action toward the widows literally means to devour—to eat up—to consume. The hypocrisy of these scribes has led them to damage the

widows. These scribes while concerned with appearances and receiving status and honor are behaving in direct contradiction to God's injunction to care for the widow, the orphan and the resident alien. These are all groups of people who were and are vulnerable in society. They are those for whom God continually express concern and care. Yet instead of following God's instructions, they are actually increasing the fragile status of the widows by in some way destroying their homes. They bear a responsibility for the vulnerable status of widows, yet publicly utter long prayers so that they appear in a favorable light to those observing them. In the placement of this condemnation next to the observation of the widow and the two pennies she places in the treasury, the actions of the scribes are sharply contrasted. As Jesus watches those who are coming to the treasury to place their offerings, he sees many rich people coming and putting in large sums. Because all money in those days was in the form of coins, the offerings of large sums would have been obvious—all that clinking when the coins were dropped in. When Jesus sees a poor widow coming in and putting in two small copper coins he calls to his disciples to notice her action. He then makes the statement which forms the basis of so many calls to stewardship: "Truly I tell you, 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." If you look carefully at what Jesus says, the statement is not actually praising her actions. Instead, it is an observation of what she has done. Just as the observations about the scribes were about what they did. These two observations are connected through the image of the widow. The actions of the scribes have damaged her, in devouring the widows' homes the widow lives in poverty with only two pennies. In pointing out this fact not so much to commend her action as to add to the condemnation pronounced on those whose actions have led to her extreme poverty. There are two groups of people and types of activities illustrated for us in these two paragraphs of text: those who are taking everything and the one who is giving everything. The message usually highlighted within each is valid for us today. We often need the reminder about behaviors which are prideful, haughty and self-gratifying. We often need to consider how our actions and our words do not match. The image of the widow's self sacrificing offering as a model for us has some merit if we focus on those who gave a small amount out of abundance. Perhaps I am overly sensitive on the image of the widow giving all that she had as a model for our stewardship. While working on the floor of the general mail facility during the height of the PTL ministry, I encountered nightly the envelopes which could not be worked on the letter sorting machines because of the coins they contained. Since many of the PTL addressed envelopes only contained pennies which fell out in the processing; since many of them were addressed in shaky hand writing—the understanding of this text that the widow was commended by Jesus is prevalent. These observations and comments about the text are not to be taken to encourage those who have much to give less. Instead, I hope that it illuminates that Jesus isn't lifting up the widow as an example but is decrying the circumstances what demand her to make such an offering. She was paying her Temple tax. That offering-- that sacrifice would likely have led to destitution if not death for her. Jesus is leveling a devastating critique against practices and those who allow them which allow, let alone encourage, this person to give "all that she had to live on". The literal translation of the Greek is to give her whole life. So what message do we take away from this? We need to see the condemnation which Jesus makes against not only hypocrisy in our lives, but in our institutions which leads to

the vulnerable being made even more so. We need to look around and see what Jesus points out to his disciples. We have the Good news to share that God cares. We have been gathered, claimed because of God's love. We are gathered to be sent into the world as messengers of God's love and caring, to participate with God's help in achieving the nurture of the widow, the orphan and the resident alien among us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.