

**"SINCERELY POOR"**

October 14, 2018

MARK 12:38-44

**She wakes up in a dark place.** At first, she is unsure of where she is. There is something vaguely unsettling about her surroundings even though the voices she hears are familiar. The widow's family has taken her in to their quarters as is the custom in her culture after a woman's husband dies.

**She finds room in her heart to say prayers of thanksgiving and praise through** her silent tears, even as her prayer slips into an intercession for her salvation from grief and fear. Today she will go to the Temple to make her offering. It is what she has been taught to do in her faith tradition. It is what God wants her to do.

**She lights her candle and dresses** for her journey, fingering the only two copper coins she has to her name. This is such a small amount to give to the glory of God! She used to watch her husband go faithfully to the Temple to pay into its treasury, but now that he is gone, the widow will travel there alone, pray alone, and worship alone. She hopes her pittance will be enough to please God. It's all that she has.

**This story makes me kind of angry!** The story of the widow's mite seems all wrong to me—doesn't it to you, too? I always thought a

mite was just a microscopic little bug that gets in the ears of my dog. But I found an alternate definition in the dictionary: a mite is also a very small contribution of money.

**Why does the poverty-stricken widow** feel compelled to give up her last two pennies to the Temple Treasury? While she lacks for her basic necessities, will the Treasury really suffer without her measly copper coins? And why is the generous contribution of the rich donors pooh-pooed by Jesus? This doesn't seem right! Wouldn't it help the Temple treasury more to have the large donations rather than the widow's mite? Why is credit denied by Jesus to those who give a lot?

**No! Jesus calls the attention of the disciples** to her act and at the same time he belittles the generosity of the rich people! What are we to make of this confusing story?

**Troy and Patty have moved their family to Parker** in response to a job offer from an IT firm in Denver. They have moved to the larger town from a small one in Kansas where they knew everybody, and everybody they knew went to the same Congregational church.

Suffering from culture shock, Patty meets the movers at their new home in the new and unfamiliar neighborhood. A neighbor comes to their door with a warm cherry pie and an even warmer smile, offering to help with the unpacking of the mountain of boxes. They exchange introductions and learn about each other's families.

**After a time, Troy asks** about churches in the area, and he and Patty are pleased to learn of a UCC church nearby. Patty tells the neighbor that in Kansas she established a Thanksgiving dinner ministry for struggling families in her community. The neighbor excitedly affirms that her church is involved in just such a ministry with the local food bank, and she has been thinking about helping out with the collecting of the food items.

A stewardship opportunity is born. Two copper coins is all it takes.

**Pastor Addie is looking over the budget** for the coming fiscal year at the church. Sighing, she struggles to understand the charts and graphs and formal line items. The question comes to mind: how can a pastor help the congregation to understand the data so that they will be able to pledge faithfully?

**Afterall, the church needs to meet certain operating expenses.** The building has served the church well, but it needs fixing in places and fairly major overhauls in other aspects. There are "we needs" and there are "we wants" that co-exist with "wouldn't it be nice if we *coulds*." All are meritorious, but how are decisions to be made amongst them? These are the day-to-day administrative challenges she faces, but there exists before her a broader ministry vision to explore.

**Exciting ideas for ministry and mission outreach** dance around in Addie's head. The church governing board has talked about expanding the children's programs. There has also been talk of a jail ministry. There is a parishioner who has expressed a call to ordained ministry, but so far has rejected these urgings for lack of financial resources.

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**A parishioner who has just retired as a financial consultant** stops by the church office and sees Pastor Hobart stewing in deep bemusement. They talk, and the parishioner offers to teach the governing board about narrative budgeting, the kind of budgeting that explains the ministries in terms all can understand, in words that are inspiring of the vision and mission of the church.

**Gratefully, Pastor Bart accepts the offered expertise;** the parishioner beams in the moment of a ministry fulfilled. A stewardship opportunity is born. Two copper coins.

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**Judy and Jeannie inherit some money from their aunt in Michigan.** Faithful members of their church for many years, they dedicate 10% of their inheritance to form an endowment fund for the church so that its work can continue long after they are gone. They have fun planning how to tell the church governing board about their gift. They are cheerful givers, and a stewardship opportunity is born.

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These have been generic scenarios common to our Christian churches today. As a faithful member or friend of UCC Parker Hilltop church, you may at this point be asking: What does Jesus call us to do? Are we really supposed to give all that we have, as the text today would suggest, putting ourselves in financial jeopardy to promote the work of the people of God in the world?

**Dan Dick, writing on the tradition of church stewardship, may be of some help to us here.** He asks of the Christian faithful three questions:

**Who are we? Whose are we? and What are we doing here** in this faith community? Let's explore further the basics of these critical questions:

**Who are we?** Are we the sticks and stones of this church? The budget? The programs? Meaningful and well-attended worship service on Sunday? Or is there a larger spiritual purpose that we are to fulfill as a church?

The Good News is that we **are** the "priesthood of all believers". The Good News is that Jesus, in his Great Commission, made disciples of us all and sent us out into the world to proclaim the Word and make generation upon generation of faithful peoples.

**All of us that make up this congregation** share the responsibility for this commission. It is not up to any one person or

family to fund the mission of the church, except as one of the many stewards of the greater mission. It is not up to the Church Council and other local church teams to fund the programs and ministries of the church, except along with you as stewards of the greater vision.

**And it is not up to just a few select givers** to maintain the worship and ministry opportunities for the rest of us. *We all* must be stewards in support of the greater vision. No, *we, the church*, are not the building or the bylaws or the budget; rather, we are the Mission, Message, and Ministry proclaimed in our core values and lived out in our shared sense of a joyful calling.

**We are the people who volunteer** to teach our children's Sunday school; we are the people who accept invitations to serve on the teams of the church's infrastructure. We are the deacons, the Church Council and Church Officers, and the persons who collect food for the hungry. We are the young people getting ready in just a few weeks to Confirm our faith and take on the mantle of church membership.

**We are the persons who bring to all our number** the Word and Sacrament; we are the ones who sing in the choir, and we are the ones who commit to financial pledging and who endow special projects, who answer the call for special ministry funding. We are the persons who support the work of this church even beyond the limitations of our mortal lives through memorials and planned endowment giving.

**Our sense of who we are thrives in the embodiment of our mission statement. We are a progressive and open community of faith and service, a beacon on the hilltop. We are called to be *doers*.**

If you want to read along, locate our Mission statement on page 3 of today's Bulletin. Let's affirm our calling together:

**At United Church of Christ Parker Hilltop:**

- **We know that God loves all people unconditionally;**
- **We experience Holy Spirit joy in worship and in service to others;**
- **We feel included and affirmed in church community and life no matter who we are or where we are on our journey of faith;**
- **We invite questions of God, the Bible, and the Church; and**
- **We seek through Jesus Christ to do justice, love kindness, and be a part of something greater than ourselves.**

**Who are we?** We are Christians who joyfully and faithfully use our collective time, talent and treasures to build the kin-dom of God for all seekers. **For whose are we anyway?** We are the children of the living, Still Speaking God. We are the stewards of the world breathed into being by God out of profound and abiding love. We are the safe-keepers of all the creatures and resources of God's creation. We are the children of the covenant of the patriarchs. We are the descendants of millions of beings who struggled to find a personal relationship with God. We are the keepers of the eternal flame, images of God who knew us in the womb.

**Countless people died trying to preserve** their inheritance as the people of God. We belong to all of them. We belong to all the martyrs who died—who gave their everything—so that we can freely walk around with our Bibles, our beliefs, and our prayers.

**Christians must not go quietly into the night.** We belong to the entire history of the peoples of faith and we must preserve our tradition in church community for the generations that follow us.

Sometimes it may seem that mainline Protestantism barely has two copper coins of spirit and of financial support to rub together. We can often relate to the impoverished widow, but we must give heartily and faithfully to this church effort—we can't *afford* to hold back.

**What are we doing here? This week, the UCCPH** Long Range Planning Team led by Al Thompson, will start its work. Several church members and I will begin looking at the core values of the church body and how those values will play out in the months and years to come.

We will be asking the questions Dan Dick outlines in his work: **Who** are we? **Whose** are we? And **what** are we called to be as a faith community? In starting such an examination of our identity, our purpose, and our future, we affirm here at UCC Parker Hilltop that new opportunities for stewardship are born in us every day.

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**The widow does not know that the mysterious rabbi from Galilee is watching her as she approaches the Temple Treasury.** No



matter. She is not there to impress the Son of Man or anyone else for that matter. Mark's widow has no thought of the financial aspects of her act. She has no idea about budgets or percentage giving or staff expenses or the costs of Temple maintenance.

**Her act is a sacred one; it is an act of pure faith.** Faith—not finance. She has given all she has to the glory of God despite the cruel hand in life she has been dealt; she is *sincerely poor*. Despite her poverty, her loneliness, her grief, and the loss of her beloved however, the widow has met God in her act of giving, and she has been blessed by Jesus for her act of devotion.

**This is the Good News for the widow,** and she doesn't even know it at the time. Her Savior looks upon her with love and acceptance.

God love you and keep you too, gentle people of faith, as you prayerfully consider your opportunities for stewardship today.

*May It Be So.*