

Proper 27 B, November 8, 2009
Church of the Reformation—Lutheran, Affton, MO
Text: Mark 12:38—44

What's in Your Wallet?

Our calendars say that it is the second Sunday in November, but our text from Mark's Gospel says that it's Tuesday of Holy Week—Holy Tuesday, just two days after Jesus had entered Jerusalem, riding on a donkey, amid the confetti of Hosannas and palm branches. On Holy Monday, our Lord had turned the tables on those who were selling and buying in the Temple. So on this Holy Tuesday, Jesus is in the temple teaching and Mark records that a “great throng heard Him gladly.” And in His teaching Jesus speaks of the scribes, the official teachers of the law, those who thought that membership has its privileges—long robes of distinction, special recognition, the seats in the synagogues for the high feasts. The scribes thought that their privileges included the right to take as their own the houses of widows. No wonder Jesus signals a warning about the scribes. “Beware of them,” Jesus warns, because He knows what is in their wallets. Their wallets are their hearts, filled with themselves, their wealth, and their gods.

A sidebar: There were no rich widows in the culture of first-century Palestine. When their husbands died, widows did not inherit the property; that went to the first-born son. Widows lost not only their husbands but also any means to support their lives. Widows were forced to live off the good graces of other male relatives and anyone in the community who might provide a meal here, a little money there.

Against such a backdrop comes the second act of today's Gospel reading. Our Lord sits in the outer court of the Temple, known as the Treasury in the court of the women. In that Treasury were trumpet-shaped containers set up to receive the contributions of the faithful. These containers were trumpet shaped not only to funnel the offerings into the receptacles, but also to amplify the sound of the coins clinking down into the coffer. The greater the offering, the louder the noise; thus everyone would know what's in the donor's wallet.

As Jesus sits there in the Treasury, He sees "many rich people put in large sums" of money into offering box. Jesus also sees a poor widow "put in two small copper coins." Compared with the vast amounts of money tossed into the treasury by the wealthy, the two mites that the poor widow gives are a mere pittance. By today's standards, her offering amounts to a fraction of a cent. Yet it is her offering that our Lord Christ recognizes as extraordinary.

The teachable moment for the disciples reveals that the wealthy threw in great quantities of money because they could afford to part with it, since they had so much. Jesus says that the widow "out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all that she had to live on." This poor widow gives her whole living to the one good God, loving Him with her whole heart and trusting Him for her future. What's in her wallet? Nothing really—two coins. The more important question is What's in her heart? Faith in God, a dependence on God for everything. She didn't have two feet to stand on, as we say; she didn't have bootstraps to pull herself up. She was totally dependent on nothing but the grace of God.

With the times we have gone through in the last days, months, years, the question for us truly has been, "What's in your wallet?" All too often we spell security with a capital dollar sign,

measuring our goals in terms of dollar signs. Jesus changes the question of “What’s in your wallet?” to “What’s in your heart?” Is it the dollars and securities that we spend so much time accumulating? Is money your heart, your security, your source of power, or is it a tool for our stewardship of God’s gifts? Are we dependent on our money to give us all we want and need from life, or are we dependent on God for everything we need to sustain this life? “What’s in our hearts?” is harder to answer than “What’s in our wallets?”

We see our wallets and all they represent as signs of independence, signs that we are making it on our own. But where is our independence when markets crash, when we lose our jobs, when uncertainty shakes our security, whether social or health? A closer look reveals how broke we are in our good intentions, how broke is our charity that exists more to brush up our image than to help the poor, how broken our relationships are in family and with friends that makes a mockery of charity beginning at home. We are in greater poverty than we or our wallets believe or care to admit. We are in the same poverty of the widow that Jesus saw.

It is in our poverty of “security” and “independence,” the poverty of our sin and death, that we need help. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians (II, 8:9): “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you by His poverty might become rich.” With Christ our future is secure! Our Lord has paid the price, not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood. He purchased our forgiveness with a love that dollar signs, copper coins, or wallets can never measure. Jesus has even bought forgiveness for our preoccupation with dollar signs and our wallets. His forgiveness frees us from fears for our security. We need not be slaves of mammon nor worship at its idol throne. We can hallow our wallets by using them to answer pleas for peace from peace-less hearts; we can hallow our

wallets to feed the hungry, to enrich the poor, to clothe the naked, and to speed the Gospel of our Father's rich provision to every corner of the earth. Like the widow, who tossed the only shred of independence she had into the treasury box, we can have complete dependence on God, with our lives being grounded in the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

St. Paul, in writing his second letter to the Corinthians (9:6—15), says it better than I can.

“Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. As it is written ‘He has distributed freely, He has given to the poor; His righteousness endures forever.’ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission flowing from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you. Thanks be to God for His inexpressible gift!”

Thanks be to God, indeed!

Henry V. Gerike