

## **Hearing the Word of Grace**

Menno Mennonite Church  
November 10, 2024

**Purpose:** To receive the witness of the Jesus about the full meaning of our institutions.

**Message:** Jesus, always different than what we are given to imagine, invites us to live fully the way of the kingdom.

**Scripture:** Mark 12:38-44 (I will read), Psalm 146 (please read)

**Synopsis:** We place a good deal of meaning on the tone in which we hear it. The same thing said in a certain way makes all the difference. Mostly when we read the Widow's mite—Jesus' reflection on giving the very last of that which has been received—we apply to tone that we often apply to Jesus—the tone of should. Yet when we read it in the context of speaking around and about the institution of the temple and its way that it impacts those who have the least, the tone here changes. Instead of go and do likewise, the tone delivers the message of God's care for those who are most vulnerable.

Mark 12:38-48

<sup>38</sup> As he taught, Jesus said,  
    “Beware of the scribes,  
    who like to walk around in long robes,  
    and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,  
<sup>39</sup> and to have the best seats in the synagogues  
    and places of honor at banquets!  
<sup>40</sup> They devour widows’ houses  
    and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.  
    They will receive the greater condemnation.”

<sup>41</sup> He sat down opposite the treasury,  
and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury.  
Many rich people put in large sums.

<sup>42</sup> A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins,  
which are worth a penny.

<sup>43</sup> Then he called his disciples and said to them,

“Truly I tell you, this poor widow  
has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.  
<sup>44</sup> 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.”

Something that we know intuitively is that our language carries meaning in its tone. Not literally in English, as with some languages. One of the challenges of learning Chinese besides being an ancient language with a character set that bears no resemblance to anything familiar is tuning your ear to the tonality of the thing. Going from an up pitch to a down pitch makes the difference between speaking about a horse and merely asking a question. But English is about as bad. We know that the mere observation of “Oh Really” goes from interested surprise to suspicious disbelief all by the loading of the tone that comes with it. The littlest alteration makes the difference between curiosity and insult. It is something that we learn at a fairly early stage. We are working on this in our house, sometimes applying a quick “Sarcasm” at the end of those things that we didn’t want taken 100% seriously. The concept is a bit out there, and we are learning that just because what was said with a disclaimer carries the disclaimer, doesn’t mean that you get away with the consequences of the ill timed comment. Just because you say its Sarcasm doesn't mean it doesn't hurt all the same. It is that all important part of language that makes a huge difference in what we understand from what is being said: the adverb—that part of speech that explains the how becomes awfully important.

Which is a bit ironic because I am not sure if your noticed or not but the Bible doesn’t do a great job of giving us the context in which things are being said. It will give us the who, what, when, where and, if we are lucky at time the why of things that are said, but very seldom does it offer us the stage direction speaking to HOW things were said. It is the rare Bible verse indeed that gives us important narrative clues like “Jesus replied chuckling” or “Peter screamed with terror”. The narration is the basics, applying “answered”, “spoke” and “said” when we could really use the more colorful and telling words like “Shouted”, “Whispered”, or “barked”. To be sure I am guessing this is what is lost in translation both literally and figuratively as we look for meaning in so much of what is being reported, time and again evening out whole conversations to a polite disinterested something that is read without a whole lot of meaning of emphasis. Really it makes all the difference.

In case you have been wondering, it is this reason why I chose to read my own scripture texts for preaching. I know many of you—far more than who think they would do a good job of it—would do a superb job of rendering scripture actively and well. But I often find that I am listening for and wanting to add the pathos and meaning to the reading to feed into the text, reading the text in the way I want to explain the text. That is hard to coach someone into on a

volunteer basis, so it is easiest to render the text myself, trying to lend a bit of spin to it all the same.

But what does this have to do with the giving of a couple of coins in the temple? I think it is actually a story that comes down to tone for us to catch the full implications of what is going on here.

By itself and on its own, how we generally encounter the text, we are given to reading the text pretty much on the face of it. This becomes a singular example of the sacrificial giving of one devoted to God. This widow is elevated to become the role model; someone to be emulated and admired. We imagine Jesus' voice full of appreciation and wonder at the giving nature of one such as these. The widow's mite becomes a favorite of Stewardship Sunday reminding us all to give until it hurts and then to give some more.

As admirable and encouraging as this story absolutely is, I am not sure that the story is included in the narrative right here and right now to make that point. Nothing should be taken away from the widow herself. We can certainly credit her for her heart absolutely being in the right place. But let me go back and read you a verse or two with a different tone that may well be in Jesus' range.

“Truly I tell you, this poor widow  
has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.  
<sup>44</sup> 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.”

I am by no means the world's finest actor here but what I was going for here is what I think might have been carried in the voice of Jesus at the time: a hint of scorn, critique, astonishment and even a bit of anger. Given the larger context of the disciples and Jesus having at long last arrived in Jerusalem, being hailed as the messianic savior then spending time in the center of all Judism, the temple all the while engaging in verbal fencing with the scribes and pharisees who are moving to entrap him. This entire section is about exactly that as Jesus dismantles the temple establishment. Their views on the Messiah, the Christ were woefully inadequate. They prattled on and on about how the Christ would be David's son, thus losing sight of the fact that the true Christ would be not just a distant relative of David but David's Lord, David's God. The scribes had played into the popular idea that one day a great-great-great grandson of David would show up and would lead a popular uprising and revolt against Rome.

He'd be a human figure but a powerful one who would fulfill the people's every political aspiration.

But that is what Jesus is trying to say the whole time: the true Christ, the Son of God, not merely the hereditary successor to David was coming to Earth things would take on a different form than what they were expecting. For where God is involved, surprises often attend early and often. God's way are not our ways. God's institutions are not our institutions. God's power is not our power. It never has been and never will be. In fact, God might just turn the whole world upside-down and do a shockingly new thing. Of course, keep in mind that Jesus spoke these words less than 5 days prior to his own death on a cross. Were he limited to only the son of David it would be come to nothing. But the Son of God—then all bets are off.

Jesus encounters the clergy of the place and time and runs circles around them. He simplifies the law to its essential points. He critiques their fascination with David's line to explain things. Now he is calling them out on their very behavior and inclinations down to the clothes that they wear. Jesus pegs them as pompous, vain, proud, and arrogant. We have to ask: do we think it insignificant that he diagnosis their failures as destroying the widow's houses—the very houses they themselves are charged by God to protect within the law—and then he comments on the giving patterns of the widow in question? However it happens to do so, it seems that the Scribes are creating the conditions where this already vulnerable person feels obliged to give more than she should. This was a revealing action: both of her sincerity and sacrifice and the way that the same virtue can be twisted in the name of power. This is what bring exasperation to Jesus' voice.

My friends; it would be fool hardy of me to stand here and declare the dimensions and character of the kingdom of God. Especially after speaking to its mysteries just some time before. But we can know this: the way of the kingdom, the way that we are called to follow, the way of being little Christ's in the world will seldom take the forms and details that we expect them to in the world as we know it. The grace of being welcomed for who and what we are, beloved from the first is the fundamental principle of grace on which faith rests. In this passage and so many more we are reminded that we are given the kingdom not out of right thinking, right believing, right doing or right behaving. We are welcomed into the kingdom of God out of Grace. In this kingdom there is universal identity as children of God. God receives us in the kingdom because we are beloved of God. Everything that we do from there on out in the

Christian life, in all of life is an outflow and an overflow of that Grace with the singular purpose of extending the grace of belovedness to whomever we next meet. That encompasses all that we do especially in the church, even down to the mundanity of the offering plate or how we treat the people in the world.

We come to the kingdom not out of obligation but because it is where we belong. We come there in Grace. Grace that allows us to rest easy in the joy of knowing that what ever we do we do it for God and in God. Grace calls us the freedom of being who we really are because we are new creatures in Christ. Grace that assures us that when we seek to follow faithfully, even against the very tides of the world it may seem at times, we will be met, supported and surprised in the kingdom's hope.

It is within this kingdom that we belong, first, last and always. This week we witnessed history made and to be made in our world and in our country. Some of us gathered together are pleased, others are not. So it is and so it always will be: the body has many members and indeed many identities. This is a strength, not a liability. But we are joined in this: that we belong to Jesus Christ alone, and to him we owe singular identity. The full power of the universe does not reside where we expect it to reside, nor does it work in the ways that it seems so readily to work. We owe our world far more than just our opinion of which way we would choose to go. We are invited to do the work of the kingdom in every season and every time. It is not ours to choose where or how the kingdom comes. It is only ours to find the ways to extend the grace that first encompassed us, and holds us still, come what may

God's kingdom comes in the places where we least expect it. May we ever be ready to hear and know the voice of our Lord, following where he may lead. For it is in this kingdom where our full future resides.