

Text: Mark 12: 38-44  
Title: Bet Your Bottom Dollar  
Date: 11.08.09  
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Have you ever been down to your last dollar?  
Have you ever dug down deep in your pockets and had only a few cents?  
Have you ever scraped the bottom of your economic barrel?

I don't mean have you ever had an empty checking account while you're waiting for a check to clear....

I don't mean has your cash flow ever been choked, but your savings were flush....

I don't mean did you discover that your retirement account was not what it was a few years ago....

I mean have you ever been flat-busted-broke?

While serving as the live-in manager of a home for homeless men I received a small stipend. One weekend I spent that stipend at a sorority dance at Hope College and came back to Chicago with just a couple dollars in my pocket. I didn't want to suffer the all-too-familiar embarrassment of calling my parents to confess my fiscal mismanagement and ask for more money. I didn't have any savings on which to draw or any trust fund to tap. So, for a few weeks I ate in the soup line and stole raisin-bread and cheese from the pantry. And, then one morning I took my last dollar and bought a Tribune and a Coke-a-Cola.

Nothing courageous here,  
nothing dramatic,  
nothing pious or exemplary or eternal,  
out of my poverty I bought a pop and a paper.  
Here today ~ gone tomorrow.

Have you ever been down to your last dollar?

The story of the widow and her mite is a reliable old sermon sawhorse. She is the saint of stewardship. Down to her last two bits she gave everything that she had. The Greek word here is *bion* or *bios* ~ from which we get biology. She gave of her very life. In the middle of the religious marketplace,

above the din of the wealthy getting their names etched in the temple bricks,  
against the backdrop of fancy-pants-preachers in flowing robes,  
from out of her poverty,  
this anonymous widow held nothing back and gave her last dollar.

And, Jesus sees her. Jesus sees the one that everyone else has passed over, he sees the one on the margins, and he calls his disciples over to point out the contrast. It is a powerful picture that will preach. So, in an internet sermon, made to be pilfered, plagiarized, and preached in pulpits all across America this morning, one preacher puts it this way:

*Jesus takes an opportunity in the passage before us to point out an unlikely person--a poor widow--as an example of what God values most in the stewardship*

*of our money. I want to suggest that what Jesus values in this woman are a Genuine Heart, a Grateful Spirit, and a Generous Attitude.*

Maybe that is the point. Maybe this text is meant to encourage us to give genuinely, gratefully, and generously. Maybe this text is meant to encourage us to give out of our poverty.

Whoever you are, wherever you are, with whatever you have....

It's not what you give; it's what's in your heart.

It's not the measure that you give; it's the measure that you have left.

It's not about fortune in the world's eyes; it's the fortune in God's eyes.

Maybe this widow and her two copper coins is a model for all us.

Maybe...

Maybe there is a different reading....

There is nothing in the text to suggest the tone of Jesus' voice. There is nothing to suggest that when Jesus called over the disciples and pointed out the widow that his instructions were, "Remember the rich young ruler? Well look at how this poor widow does what he couldn't or wouldn't do. Go thou and do thee likewise..." There is no indication that his intention was praise. What if there was a tone of sadness to his voice?

What if there was lament?

What if he points her out in admiration but also in astonishment?

What if this is not about stewardship but about revolution?

Over the years the context of this familiar text has fallen away. It seems to stand alone as a memorable snapshot. But, it is set in a larger story.

Jesus had just arrived in Jerusalem and was creating quite a stir. He was turning things upside down. In the face of Roman authority, he was welcomed as a king ~ riding on a donkey. In the place of business as usual he started a wild rumpus in the temple ~ overturning tables and driving out the money changers. In being questioned by the chief priests and elders he unsettled their grip on authority and the law and the prophets. And, all of this was being done in the shadow of the coming cross.

Nothing was what it seemed ~

a whole new world was being born,

a whole new kingdom was coming....

And then in the middle of the temple, Jesus points out the powerful and the pompous parading around perpetrating a system that preyed on the poor. He calls out the ruling religious elites and the long prayers who think that some sort of score is being kept. He names a temple practice that exploited widows for profit and positioned priests between God and his people.

Jesus then sat down opposite the temple treasury box. Or, maybe better said, sitting in opposition to the treasury box, Jesus sees one of these widows coming. Faithful or forced, regimented or reticent ~ she silently slips in her temple tax. She pays her part. She does the only thing that she knows to do. And, maybe in hope or hopelessness she throws in that last extra fraction of a penny.

But, Barbra Brown Taylor asks:

*Are we really supposed to admire a woman who gave her last cent to a morally bankrupt religious institution? Was it right for her to surrender her living to those who lived better than her? What if she were someone you knew, someone of limited means, who decided to send her last dollar to the 700 Club? Would that be admirable or scandalous? Would it be a good deed or a crying shame?*

Dear friends, as Jesus calls over his disciples to point out the discrepancy between the teachers of the law and the poor widow, what if he is turning the temple on its head? What if this is just one more picture of an upside down kingdom?

The temple system of sacrifice, the social structures that support injustice, the corrupted covenant ~ it was all coming down. While it is true that Jesus doesn't chastise the woman for participating in the system neither does he praise her. And, without stealing any thunder from next Sunday, in the very next verses Mark records Jesus predicting the destruction of the temple. It is coming down by way of the cross.

So, don't bet your bottom dollar on religious observance and temple tax, don't trust in long prayers or stewardship campaigns, don't put your faith in right theology or rule keeping, don't bank on what you do....

Trust in the one who is turning this world around.

Trust in the one who would empty himself.

Maybe the widow is a model to the extent that she mirrors Jesus ~ who held nothing back but gave his very life

Have you ever been down to your last dollar?

During my recent trip to Israel I saw the Dead Sea. We had just been to Masada and to the site where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. The day was blazing hot ~ 115 degrees and not a whisper of a cloud. The trip was drawing to a close and I had reached my fill of seeing churches and caves where something biblical might have happened, so I hurried down to the water. They gave us an hour. I was going to spend every minute of it in the Dead Sea.

There were people from all over the world floating in the water and slathering themselves in the black mud ~ there is supposed to be therapeutic powers. I ran into the water like a kid let out school for summer vacation.....

But! The water wasn't cool; it was hot. It wasn't refreshing; it was thick, salty, acidic, and it burned anything tender. You couldn't sink or swim to save your soul. You could only float. I laid on top of the water and sizzled in the sun like an egg on a hot tin roof. (To mix metaphors....)

Earl Simmons is a pastor in Washington, DC. He serves a small storefront church. He is earnest and honest, and seemed to be the most fully alive when he was listening to gospel music on his headphones or praying with great fervor. Earl Simmons doesn't swim. So, he sat sweating in the shade along the Dead Sea shore, until enough of us cajoled, challenged, and coaxed him into the water. It took the better part of an hour, but finally he came into the water.

Once in, with fear and trembling, he worked and grunted and groaned and flapped and sputtered and.... And the more he struggled and splashed the more he stirred up a frenzy that made no difference. But, when he realized that the water was going to hold him,  
when he learned that he wasn't going to sink,  
when he relaxed and let his arms and legs rest,  
when he simply fall back into the buoyancy,  
then a giant smile crossed his face and he cried out,  
"Hallelujah! I am swimming! Thank you Jesus!"  
And, he laughed and laughed deep and long.

Faith is that foundational, ultimate, ground of trust. Faith is betting your bottom dollar. With nothing else to add, nothing else to do, nothing else to give but our poverty, faith is falling back into God's unfailing grip.

In the words of Craig Dykstra:

*Faith is the knowledge of the reality of God's buoyancy ~ of God's upholding love and mercy, present to the world and to us all in every situation and circumstance of life. Faith is life lived resting in God's grace.*

Have you ever been down to your last dollar?

For, no matter how broke or broken you are,  
no matter how salty or acidic this old world gets,  
no matter how our politics falter or our bodies fail,  
no matter how rough the water or how dead the sea,  
no matter what the struggle....

We belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that through his poverty we might become rich.*

*II Corinthians 8:9 adapted*

Bet your bottom dollar on that buoyancy.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.