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## **Mark 12:38-44**

<sup>38</sup> As he taught, he 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."

**"The Undivided Heart"**  
**Rev. Leanne B. Thompson**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Willmar, MN**  
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I hope you will pardon me, as I stand up here in my robe and stole. I am feeling a little uneasy wearing them today. These vestments, as they are called, are a symbol of my office. They mark me as one called to leadership in the church, and represent the standard of scholarship I am called to uphold. And they are a reminder every time I wear them --- a surprisingly heavy, and warm, reminder --- of the yoke of service I am called to bear on your behalf. They are just a little bit uncomfortable, because my call is to be uncomfortable on your behalf. Today particularly so. Because I just read you a scripture about a distinguished religious leader, identifiable by his robes, condemned by Jesus for a long-winded and empty public display of religion.

Those are exactly the worst words to read as vested clergy standing in the pulpit preparing to preach. So, if you would be willing, just for the moment, could you overlook the robe? And can I just talk to you person to person, heart to heart, in plain language? Because this is about my heart, and your heart.

In the church we tend to use words that the rest of the world doesn't use. Every business, organization, or field of study has its own insider language. So,

it's not unusual that we would have our own insider words, too. The problem is, those of us in the church sometimes use those words without really knowing what they mean. We use them because they are part of our tradition and foundational to what we believe – like the word *grace*. Grace is core to who we are and what we stand for, but when pressed to give a definition or explanation we trip all over ourselves trying to explain it. Let alone live it. In our Confirmation lesson on Wednesday the study guide prompted me to teach the students to look at Grace as an acrostic:

Gods's  
Riches  
At  
Christ's  
Expense

It's neat, and tidy, and now all of you have a concise answer if you are ever asked to define *grace*, but what does that even mean? Rather, what does that actually have to do with how we live our lives?

The theme that emerges from today's text is another one of those troubling words. This is a text about being *righteous*. But what does *righteous* even mean? Who are the righteous? Who would like to take a stab at defining that one? I don't have a tidy little acrostic poem for that one.

In her book *Amazing Grace* author Kathleen Norris writes about her struggle with the word *righteous*:

The word "righteous" used to grate on my ear; for years I was able to hear it only in its negative mode, as self-righteous, as judgmental. Gradually, as I became more acquainted with the word in its biblical context, I found that it does not mean self-righteous at all, but righteous in the sight of God. And this righteousness is consistently defined by the prophets, and in the psalms and the gospels, as a willingness to care for the most vulnerable people in the culture, characterized in ancient Israel as orphans, widows, resident aliens, and the poor.

Norris goes on to remind her readers that much of the fabled wrath of God in the Bible is directed against those who preserve their own wealth and power at the expense of the orphan, the widow, the resident alien, and the poor.

**Today's text gives us 2 snapshots.**

The first snapshot is of the scribe. He is the self-righteous one. His culture would have esteemed him as righteous because of his holy office. He was considered a righteous one because he was an expert on holy law and exceptionally good and observing that law, and therefore right with God. He knew all the right big, impressive words to use. But he was not righteous. He was self-righteous, enamored of his own importance and the respect it garnered him. He was attached to the privilege he received because of his position. He was one who preserved his own wealth and power at the expense of the orphan, the widow, the resident alien, and the poor.

The other snapshot is of the widow, upon whose shoulders the burden of the scribe's self-righteousness rests.

The first snapshot is of the scribe who is keeping up righteous appearances.

The second snapshot is of the widow who is invisible.

The first snapshot is of the scribe with divided loyalties: a pretense of devotion to God masking a heart pursuing preservation of power and position.

The second is of the widow who demonstrates whole-hearted devotion to God no matter what it costs her. An undivided heart.

**And it is important for us to pause and study these two snapshots, because if we consider them carefully, we will recognize them reflected in our world today.**

Our world is still full of the weak and the strong, the rich and the poor, the righteous and the self-righteous. It's just not always easy to tell them apart. Indeed, this passage articulates a truth that still applies. Thomas A. Bryant, in his commentary on this text writes: "...unfaithfulness can masquerade as faithfulness, and pretense can parade as piety." Unfaithfulness can masquerade as faithfulness. Pretense can parade as piety. It happens all the time. Sometimes intentionally – the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing pretending to be something it isn't in order to take advantage of us. There are any number of con artists out there – some of them dressed like preachers,

even – who would be more than happy to make you empty promises if only you send that offering today. For a small donation, they would be happy to pray you right with God, if you are righteous enough to be worthy of God's blessing. Friends, don't buy what they are selling. Wolves in sheep's clothing.

But sometimes unfaithfulness masquerades as faithfulness and pretense parades as piety in our lives – you and me – because, even at our best we are flawed human beings. And sometimes, even when we have the best of intentions, we are hypocrites: claiming one truth with our lips and demonstrating another truth with our lives. Sometimes we are scribes even when we don't mean to be.

That is why the widow is so compelling. And also, why she is a challenge for us. Seriously, who in their right mind would put their last coins in a collection plate? We don't expect you, any of you, to take food out of your own mouths or out of the mouths of your children to support the church. We wouldn't ask any of you to give the very last that you have. In fact, if people around here know that you are down to the very last that you have, they will do what they can to help you. But this isn't just about money. This nearly penniless widow is a metaphor.

Consider this woman: she is all in. She is absolutely undivided in her loyalty to God. There is absolutely nothing, even her own life, that is more important than her devotion to God. Unlike her, every single one of us, to some degree is divided. Every single one of us is willing to be fully committed to God – to a point. There is a line we won't cross where generosity is concerned. We can only afford to be generous – to a point. We can only afford to be forgiving – to a point. We can only afford to be kind – to a point. We can only afford to be faithful – to a point. Just to the point where it starts to get uncomfortable, or demands too much sacrifice.

Our hearts are divided. We are people who desire to be the people God has called us to be: loving, and kind, and generous to the widow, the orphan, the resident alien, and the poor. AND we desire self-preservation: maintaining our own comfort at the expense of the widow, the orphan, the resident alien, and the poor. If you peel back enough layers, every one of us benefits at the expense of someone else. Do you ever wonder why we're able to get such a great deal at the big box store? Do you ever consider where those bananas came from in January, and who labored to pick and ship them? Do you know if

the employee who cleans the bathroom, or the hotel room, or picks up clothing off dressing room floor, or handing you a bargain burger through a window is making a living wage for his or her labors? If this full-time job can feed her family, or if he goes strait from her to another shift somewhere else in order to pay the rent?

Whether we notice it or not, whether we want to be or not, we are part of a system that is built on one person getting ahead at the expense of another. Friends, we live in this tension. By this definition none of us are wholehearted, none of us are completely righteous. And after hearing what you've heard today some of you might not want to be. You might prefer to hold on to the illusion of righteousness rather than doing the hard, sacrificial work of loving your neighbor. But it might cost you your soul. Honestly, none of us are going to change overnight. There is no grand conversion experience to make us whole-heartedly holy and righteous. There is no magic formula to correct the injustices in the world that benefit us.

But there are opportunities for us to practice every day. We get to practice with the single mother in the grocery store line in front of us carefully dividing out what is covered by her WIC coupons. We get to practice with the immigrant we cross paths with in our community who is confused trying to adapt to an unfamiliar culture. We get to practice with kids who forget to say please, and who have very little for which to be thankful. We get to practice with homeless veterans, and grieving families, and traumatized communities. We get to practice loving people who annoy us, and forgiving people who have hurt us, and welcoming people we fear, and being generous toward people we despise.

And every time we practice one of those things it is an act of holy resistance against the pride, self-righteousness and greed that threaten to consume us and our neighborhoods. Choosing righteousness is an act of resistance against becoming who the world values and becoming, instead, who Christ values. Choosing righteousness is an act of peaceful resistance against bigotry, and racism, and misogyny, and terrorism, and hate. Because choosing righteousness is to choose humbling ourselves and sacrificing our own comfort, power and privilege to serve the least: the widow, the orphan, the resident alien, and the poor. To choose righteousness is to choose to love them more than we love ourselves.

Let's face it. We aren't always going to be as generous, or as forgiving, or as welcoming, as Jesus would be. We aren't always going to get it right. And that, friends, is *why* we spend so much time talking about grace in the church. Grace fills in the gap between who we are and who we want to become.

Grace gives us 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup>, chances to try again.

Grace increases our capacity to be loving, and generous, and forgiving.

Grace believes even the most hard-hearted scribe among us can becoming whole-heartedly devoted to loving and serving in Christ's name.

Grace helps us take the first wobbly steps of admitting we've been living a lie and choosing to walk a different path...the path of the righteous where the first shall be last, and the last shall be first, and there is always room to welcome the stranger as friend.

Friends, for the love of God, claim your righteous identity as people of God, not so you can be esteemed, but so you can serve. Not so others can honor you, but so that you can honor the inherent dignity of every other human being. Not so that you are guaranteed a position of importance, but so that you have a seat you can offer to another tired soul seeking rest and comfort.

And may the grace of God be deep and wide enough to cover you as you learn to walk the righteous path of justice, mercy, and peace.

Alleluia! And amen.