

## Putting In Our Two Cents

Mark 12:38-44

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As Jesus taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes,  
who like to walk around in long robes,  
and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,  
and to have the best seats in the synagogues  
and places of honor at banquets!

They devour widows’ houses  
and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.

They will receive the greater condemnation.”

Jesus sat down opposite the treasury,  
and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury.

Many rich people put in large sums.

A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins,  
which are worth a penny.

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.

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

## **Putting In Our Two Cents**

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### **I.**

I would like to begin today by informing you that for the next few days, I will be “going dark.” Last spring my cell phone battery stopped holding its charge. Being a “can do” type of person, I ordered a repair kit and battery off the internet. I mean how hard can it be to change the battery in one’s phone. Turns out, the hardest part isn’t the actual repair, it is finding or making the time to actually do it. Months went by, and I learned to live in a compromised and inconvenient fashion constantly charging my phone at every turn and any place I could. Finally, yesterday, my techno whiz of a son, Tucker, said he’d do it for me. He got the phone disassembled easy enough, only to discover I had ordered the wrong battery. The new one won’t arrive until Wednesday. Until then I’m Barney...Rubble...Stone Age.

### **II.**

Falling right in the midst of our annual fall Stewardship Drive, and given that today is Pledge Sunday, it would be easy to explore today’s sermon text in more conventional terms. This scripture reading from Mark’s Gospel is sometimes referred to as the story of the Widow’s mite; spelled m-i-t-e, in acknowledgment of her rather modest offering. The mite, also known as a lepton, was a Jewish coin and the smallest currency in use during the New Testament era. At the time of Mark’s writing, it was worth 1/64 of a denarius; with a denarius being equal to a day’s wage for a common worker back then. In today’s terms, it would be worth about 1/8 of a cent. However, this title also has a dual meaning given the homophone, m-i-g-h-t, signifying that, though small, her offering had great power and significance.

### **III.**

In the passage, we find Jesus simply surveying a scene. First, he sees the Scribes, individuals strutting around in long, white robes; hungry to be given respect, eagerly seeking places of honor, caring more for their appearance than their authenticity, and carelessly devouring the households of widows to pay for their privilege and apparent power. Then, Jesus witnesses people

contributing to the Temple treasury (aka the church); many of whom are rich, and putting in large sums of money. Finally, Jesus sees a widow, poor in financial resources as well as social standing, offering just two small copper coins; she was putting in her two cents. Recognizing this as a teachable moment from which to draw lessons from real life, Jesus calls over to his disciples and points out to them the difference between giving out of one's abundance and giving out of one's need.

#### **IV.**

So here is a story about the power of "putting in your two-cents." Though no one is quite sure about the origins of this phrase, there are a few interesting theories:

- That it comes from a British idiom and is used to preface one's opinion in hopes of lessening the impact of a possibly contentious statement, showing politeness and humility.
- That it originates in betting card games, where one must make a small bet, or ante, before beginning play; thus making an analogy between entering the game and entering a conversation.
- That it has to do with the early cost of postage in Britain, the "twopenny post," where two pennies was the normal charge of sending a letter containing one's words, thoughts or feelings to another.
- And, finally, that it is part of longer phrase meant to encourage the expression of opinion: "*If you don't put your two cents in, how can you get change?*" Making the word "change" a double entendre.

#### **V.**

I think that in many churches there exists the assumption or belief that the financial burden is carried by a relatively few number of large donors. But, in fact, with regard to our church the majority of our budget is paid for by many people each contributing the mite that we can afford. So, this morning, I'd like to acknowledge and celebrate the humility of our actions, and to offer sincere thanks to each of you. As individuals, we may only contribute our two cents, but together, these modest gifts carry the bulk of the financial load. The lesson in this is that everyone's two cents matter.

## **VI.**

I was motivated this week, however, through a confluence of events, to see this story of the Widow's Mite in another, more unconventional way. Recently, I was listening to the radio show "To The Best Of Our Knowledge" on NPR; a program which offers in-depth discussions and perspectives on a variety of topics, with this show's being on medicine and compassion. One of the guests was Dr. Andrew Weil, a Harvard trained Rheumatologist and one time Clinical Professor of Medicine and Professor of Public Health at the University of Arizona. Weil has gone on to become a very popular author and lecturer; as well as the founder of something called "Integrative Medicine": a healing-oriented approach to health care which encompasses body, mind, and spirit. During this particular episode, Dr. Weil was speaking about his book, Spontaneous Happiness. The thrust of his message was the effectiveness of treating depression with non-pharmacological life-style changes such as exercise, an anti-inflammatory diet and what he called "secular spirituality."

## **VII.**

Now, this really caught my ear. Given that sadness and anxiety come from our thoughts, he says, research is showing that we can change these thoughts by retraining our minds; and, that this retraining can result in changes of the function and structure of the brain. Now, this is a fairly bold claim because the accepted biomedical model is that the arrow of cause and effect runs one way: from biology to behavior. Weil, on the other hand, believes that cause and effect can also run the other way, with behavior changing biology.

So, how do we retrain our mind, what tools do we use? What he suggests is "Secular Spirituality." This he defines as tending to the non-physical dimension of one's life without reference to a deity, the supernatural, to sacred books, to things that are contrary to rationality or scientific knowledge, using nature, companion animals, relationships w/others forgiveness, gratitude, compassion and empathy.

## **VIII.**

Now, if you don't think about it too hard, that sounds pretty good. We can all agree that the notion of religion carries with it some rather nasty baggage. So, what we'll do is remove of the values and ideals that originate from religion, and put them off to the side. This creates a separation from all the

“bad stuff” (that is God and religion) leaving only the “good stuff” and this we will call spirituality; or, more specifically, for Dr. Weil, “Secular Spirituality.”

There are only three problems with this. First, in creating such a dichotomy between religion and spirituality, Dr. Weil separates the values from the creator or source of those values. Second, Dr. Weil assumes these values can be both understood and achieved without a relationship to the value creator. And, third, while this dichotomy may benefit the individual, it does very little for the larger world.

## **IX.**

Let's look at the process Dr. Weil proposes through different eyes. This Thursday is Veterans' Day, an occasion to honor all the men and women who have served our nation, giving their time, energy, talent; and, in some instances limb and even life, in the defense of the values of democracy, freedom and justice. Very few people, I suspect, would be willing to offer their service, let alone their life, for the *theoretical notion* of these values, if the nation, the creating source of these values, was not, itself, democratic, free or just. People offer, and at times sacrifice themselves only for a *greater good*; not for *themselves*, but for *others*. Soldiers are not brave for bravery's sake, nor do they act with valor only in defense of their own values. Instead, they exhibit these values on behalf of the others with whom those values are shared. It is the connection back to the source of the values, the value creator, which ultimately makes these values meaningful, significant and true.

## **X.**

This past week a nation of 400 million people, the most powerful country on the planet undertook a peaceful transition of power. Thousands of people, from small town mayors to a wide range county and state officials were either elected or reelected by the voice of the people; and, amazingly, no one died because of it. The more people who actually vote, the louder the collective voice, the more meaningful the outcome, and the more valuable the endeavor. But, by this very definition, the more votes which are cast means any one individual has less of an impact on the results. So, the value of participating in an election, as a voter, is derived not from getting what you as an *individual* desires, be it party, person, or mandate but, rather, the value of participating in the democratic *process* is that it strengthens the *democracy* which,

ultimately, is the greatest possible benefit for both the whole *and* the individual as well.

## **XI.**

What we can clearly see by examining Veterans' Day and Election Day, is that a world where the *individual* is held as the greatest good, is really a world on its way to forgetting what *good* really means. Good for *you* really isn't good *for* you, if it isn't also good for everybody else. Similarly, we can clearly see by examining the story of the Widow's Mite, that the value of the individual is not in *how much* one contributes, but *why* one contributes; and, how that contribution, joined with the contributions of others, yields a result that is larger than just the sum of the parts. Accordingly, each year at this time, during our Fall Stewardship Drive, we pray that by each and everyone of us putting in our two cents we hope to yield a mighty result indeed. However, no one contributes anything, not even one red cent, unless they are clear on *why* they are doing so.

## **XII.**

I certainly can understand the appeal of notions like "Secular Spirituality." I am also willing to admit that "religion," unfortunately, has not always been the most hospitable place for the spirit to be found, let alone to abound. Nevertheless, I honestly don't believe you can have one without the other. Dr. Weil notwithstanding, there is no spirituality in the creature without the Spirit of the creator, no relationship to the our neighbor without first having a relationship to God, no compassion or empathy for our sisters and brothers without forgiveness from the Son, and no gratitude for our blessings without a supernatural understanding of the God from whom all these blessings flow.

## **XIII.**

There was a time when we spoke on THE phone; meaning the *one* phone located in the center of the house with the long, twisted and tangled cord and the rotary dial. Now-a-days, we don't talk on *the* phone, we call people on *their* cell. Our society is relentlessly trending towards individuality. In one particular regard I would whole-heartedly agree with Dr. Weil, our behavior is changing our biology. In moving away from the sacred and toward the secular; we are becoming creatures who are disconnected from both the creation and, more significantly, from our Creator.

In so doing, we are also becoming disconnected from the source of our values, such that we increasingly consider them to be stand-alone; simply of our own individual choosing and choice. As if we could ignore that which is good for the world and separate it out in favor of we believe is good for us.

#### **xiv.**

We would do well to remember, however, no matter the make or model of *your* phone, or the particular apps you load on to it and use to make it your *own*, all of this is predicated on the battery, the power source. You can't just pick and choose whatever battery you wish, you need to have the *right* battery. Without it, without that connection to the source and power of our values, we go very dark indeed; forgetting that we give to others not out of abundance, but out of our need.

The season of Stewardship is when we, as people of faith, *find* the time and *make* the time to offer and sacrifice for a good which is greater than ourselves. This is in no way a compromise or inconvenience, however, as such an act is not only valuable to others but, ultimately, it is what is most valuable for ourselves as well. In so doing, we acknowledge and affirm, like the widow in her might, our connection back to the One who creates those values, which is the only way our values are meaningful, significant and true. Amen.