

PENTECOST 25B – 11/11/18
Missing the Point of the Widow's Mite
(Mark 12:38-44)

Steven Furtick is an up and coming megachurch pastor down in North Carolina, who is still not even 40 years old yet. (In case you didn't know, the definition of a megachurch is a church that worships at least 2,000 people each week.) Well, back in 2006, Furtick started Elevation Church with just 14 members. Today, in 2018, however, the weekly average attendance at his church, with its multiple campuses, has now grown to over 26,000!

But, in addition to his church's dynamic growth, Pastor Furtick has *also* been in the news in recent years because of criticisms aimed at him and, *specifically*, his new 16,000 square foot home valued at over 1.8 million dollars.

Now that wouldn't be a problem, ordinarily, if he had paid for this new home with just his own money; although many might still have criticized the apparent extravagance, of course. No, the *problem* is that it's not really clear that he purchased the home with *only* his own money. Unlike here at Hope where, if you come to our semi-annual meeting today, you can see exactly how much money is spent as well as where it is spent, Elevation Church, you see, *doesn't* report or release its financial records. And it is alleged, therefore, that there's a *co-mingling*, if you will, of the *pastor's* money and the church's money. In other words, no one really knows just how much Pastor Furtick *earns* each year, and, therefore, whether or not he actually purchased his new 16,000 square foot mansion with *only* his own money, as he claims to have done, or with the assistance of Elevation Church funds.

The only piece of available, and potentially incriminating, evidence is the fact that, interestingly enough, Pastor Furtick's name does not even appear on the *deed* of his new home. Instead, it is under the name of the "Jumper Drive Revocable Trust," and the gentleman who is the trustee of that trust is *also*, coincidentally, the Chief Financial Officer of Elevation Church. Which does sound a little suspicious, I must say.

Steven Furtick, of course, is not the *only* pastor to come under fire in recent years for extravagant lifestyles and purchases. Another megachurch pastor, this one down in Atlanta, Georgia, the aptly named Creflo *Dollar* – I kid you not "Dollar": D-o-l-l-a-r – *also* received some flack several years ago for wanting to purchase a brand new 65 million dollar Gulfstream G-650 jet – the top of the line in luxury air travel.

Now, mind you, he already *had* a 40 million dollar jet! But it's over 30 years old now and not as reliable, apparently. And, heaven forbid, if Pastor Dollar and his family now had to take *commercial* flights!

But what set off the controversy in *this* instance, it seems, was Pastor Dollar's rather unique and novel idea that he could purchase this new jet if approximately 200,000 people from around the globe each gave a gift of 300 dollars or more! You see, in addition to his 30,000 member congregation in Atlanta, there are also satellite churches in at least a dozen *other* states, as well as hundreds of thousands of followers online. If every one of them, therefore, could come up with the suggested 300 dollars, *Pastor* Dollar would, of course and very easily, have his new jet.

Understandably, some people were upset over this proposal. One former member, Shamora Barnard had this to say: "Creflo Dollar didn't have a jet when *I* went to church here, and now that he has one, he's asking for

another one. At what point does my 10 percent actually go to my community.”

But not everyone shares those feelings, however. One *current* church member, Mary Jones, upon hearing his request, planned on answering her pastor’s call for money even though she herself has to ride a bus 20 miles each Sunday just to get to church. (Which, by the way, implies that she is a woman of rather modest means; that is to say, not even able to afford her own car!)

Nevertheless, she said at the time, “We support our pastor. That’s what we’re here for. The work that he’s doing, where the Lord has him traveling, he doesn’t need a cheap airplane. He needs the *best*.”

He needs the best... Or *does* he? Is that what it’s really all about?

Like those who questioned Creflo Dollar’s appeal for money to buy a new jet, in today’s reading from the gospel of Mark, Jesus made a similar observation, offered a similar criticism, and drew a similar conclusion, about the religious leaders of his *own* day. “Beware of the scribes,” he said, “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.” In other words, even back *then* religious leaders were sometimes criticized for their extravagant lifestyles, and their sense of entitlement. This idea that somehow – just like Steven Furtick and Creflo Dollar, and others, in our own day – they somehow *deserved* to live and to be treated this way.

But at whose expense? Surely some of their worshipers can afford to give financially at a level that would allow Furtick and Dollar to enjoy a

certain – dare I say – *standard* of living. (And a very comfortable one at that!) But how many Mary Jones’s are out there in their congregations as well, people who scrimp and save just to get by financially in their own lives, and yet *still* answer the call and feel the obligation to see that their pastor gets what he wants and feels he deserves?

At its best, of course, and when it remains true to the gospel, the church is a glimpse of heaven on earth; not perfect, mind you, but an idea at least of God’s goals and priorities, and a snapshot of what God’s kingdom will be like when its finally and fully realized...

But at its *worst*, that very same church can be troubled by all the same problems and temptations and wrongdoings that plague *all* of our human institutions and endeavors; among them, especially, greed, and a loss of focus and purpose.

Now I’m not telling any tales here when I remind you that, throughout its history, the church has been guilty of some terrible things; that, at times, the church, or at least those acting on *behalf* of the church, ignored and even took advantage of those weakest and most vulnerable members of society.

For instance, we hear a lot these days about income inequality; not only here in our own country, but across the globe as well, especially between the privileged “first world,” in which *we* live, and the much poorer “third world,” which enjoys almost none of the material blessings and advantages that we do.

Desmond Tutu, the former Archbishop of Cape Town and a Nobel Prize winner, has famously said, “When missionaries first came to South

Africa, *they* had the Bible and *we* (meaning the Africans) had the land. They said to us, ‘Let us pray together.’ So we closed our eyes. And when we opened them back up now *we* had the Bible and *they* had the land!”

Taking advantage of the poor and the most vulnerable, even by religious institutions, is nothing new, however. The Old Testament, especially in the prophetic writings, is full of warnings and judgments against just this very thing.

And so keeping with that tradition, then, Jesus – here in today’s gospel reading – is leveling those very same charges. Picking up at verse 40, Jesus said, “They... (again the scribes or religious leaders) *devour* widows’ houses...” And yet at the same time, says Jesus, they also say long prayers “for the sake of appearance.” In other words, they maintain an air of piety and religiosity on the *outside*; that is, in public. But at the very same time, and in far less visible ways perhaps, they simultaneously take advantage of the weakest and most vulnerable in their midst. And there was almost no one weaker or *more* vulnerable than a widow who had no property, or inheritance, or means of support.

As Donald Juel writes in his commentary, “The widow was a good test of the community’s resolve to protect the helpless. Deprived of a husband, the widow was dependent upon the charity of the community.”

And what does Jesus accuse the religious community and its leaders of doing here? *Devouring* the widows’ houses. Now there is some question as to what this means exactly. But the next few verses *do*, however, give us at least an inkling.

But, for now, the charge that they devour widow's houses results in Jesus' stern warning: "They will receive the greater condemnation." In other words, this is not a good thing that they are doing.

Which brings us to the second, and surely more popular and memorable, half of today's reading; the story of the widow's mite. Taken by themselves – as they so often *are* – verses 41 to 44 of today's reading are held up as an example of faithful, even sacrificial, giving: Look here, look at this poor widow. She has given literally everything she has! And so, naturally, when it's held up before us in this way, the story of the widow's mite is typically seen as encouraging *us* to do the same; in other words, to give it all; everything we can possibly manage.

But is that really what's going on here? Or *are we* – when we quickly conclude that Jesus is commending her for her sacrificial giving here – simply missing the point?

Remember the context here; the setting. Jesus has just warned his listeners to beware of those religious leaders in their midst who have a sense of entitlement and therefore enjoy many of the creature comforts of life, not to mention all the prestige and notoriety that goes hand-in-hand with their positions.

So Jesus sits himself down opposite the treasury and he does a little "people-watching." And what he observes, of course, is the crowd putting money *into* the treasury; among them many rich people conspicuously putting in rather large sums.

What is referred to here as "the treasury" was actually a series of thirteen – you heard me right – *thirteen* chests, or trumpets, where charitable

contributions were placed. They were *called* trumpets because they were narrow at the mouth and wide at the bottom, shaped just like a trumpet.

Nine of these chests were for the offerings of what was legally due or expected of worshipers. And the other four were for strictly voluntary gifts.

According to tradition, trumpets 1 and 2 were for the half-shekel Temple-tribute of the current and of the past year. Trumpet 3 was for the equivalent in money for the turtledoves that were offered as a burnt and sin offering. Trumpet 4 similarly received the value of the offerings of young pigeons. In trumpet 5 went the contributions for the wood used in the Temple. Trumpet 6 for the incense used. In trumpet 7 were placed offerings for the ministry. Anything left over then went into trumpet 8. And trumpets 9-13 were used for guilt offerings, offerings of birds, the offering of a Nazarite, of the cleansed leper, and all other voluntary offerings.

So imagine for a second, if you will, separate chests or baskets for each of the major line items in our own congregational spending plan, for instance – property, mission support, administration, office equipment and technology, our various commissions and their ministries, plus staff salaries and benefits – and then you perhaps get an *idea* of what giving to the treasury at the Temple must have been like.

And remember, also, that these chests, in the shape of a trumpet as they were, would mean that the amount of one's offering would make a very conspicuous sound as it slid down that narrow neck before landing in

the wide trumpet-like bottom. In other words, large gifts would rattle around and around like pouring all of your saved-up change into that coin-counter over at Walmart. And smaller gifts, then, especially the *smallest* of gifts, would – in comparison – barely make a sound.

And that's exactly what happened here. After all these wealthy worshipers emptied all their coins into the trumpets – which *ironically* served only to “trumpet” (pun intended) their own pumped-up sense of pride and prestige, here comes this poor widow who can only drop in two measly copper coins; literally all she has to live on, even to the point of impoverishment.

Now isn't there something inherently wrong with this picture? Could it be, even, that *this* is what Jesus meant when he said that the religious authorities were guilty of devouring widows' houses?

Apparently, for Jesus, there *was* something wrong with this picture. Upon seeing this, Jesus quickly gets the attention of his disciples, and he says 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.”

Now here's the question: Was Jesus *commending* the poor widow for giving everything she had? As we normally assume he was. Or *was he*... perhaps... *condemning* a system and a state of affairs in which the poorest and most vulnerable still felt compelled to give offerings that they simply could not afford, instead of being the beneficiaries *themselves* of the community's care and concern?

Again, throughout scripture, the care of orphans and widows was at the very heart of what the community of faith, what God's people, were called to do. And so here's the point. As Peter Lockhart writes, "By Jesus pointing out the widow I do not believe that he is celebrating her giving, rather he is emphasizing that the Temple authorities, and the Israelites at large, have completely missed the point of being God's people (!) The giving," says Lockhart, "was in the *wrong* direction. It was not the *widow* who needed to give to the Temple, as if somehow this would validate her relationship with God. *No*, the Temple had a responsibility to the widow as one for whom God had specific concern."

So when we quickly applaud the widow's faithfulness and generosity, we are completely missing the point, I'm afraid. The Temple – now for us, of course, the church – was not intended to be about supporting *itself*. Rather, it was meant to be that conduit whereby the weakest and most vulnerable of God's *people* were to be supported *instead*!

Megachurch pastors like Steven Furtick and Creflo Dollar, and others like them have become religious celebrities in our time; complete with big mansions and Gulfstream jets. They certainly lead lives reflecting that celebrity status. But is that what it's all about? Is that how it's meant to be? Is the church intended simply to serve its superstar leaders? Or to merely keep itself alive and solvent as an institution? *Or...* is it intended to serve the gospel and, in so doing, to serve those in its midst who are most in need?

I will never forget the personal testimony of a former parishioner of mine. It was during the fall, which is traditionally stewardship time in the church, and somehow the subject of how much people should give as their offering came up in our conversation.

At that time, Cathy was divorced with a grown son. She had a good job overseeing the cardiac rehabilitation program at a local hospital, owned her own home, and was pretty much free – as far as I could tell – of financial worries or concerns. And she talked not only about her ability to give more in offerings than when she was younger, but also the reason *why* she chose to give more now as well.

“I know that not everyone can afford to give as much as I do,” she said. “Retirees on fixed incomes and young couples with kids, car payments and mortgages are just not able. So I’d like to think that my own offerings, that I can well afford, will go to help our church do ministry *with* and *for* those who need it most, but perhaps can’t afford it; not only in our own congregation but in our community and around the world as well.”

I guess what I’m saying here is that we completely miss the point if we simply focus on the sacrificial nature of the widow’s offering. The truth of the matter is that the widow in today’s reading was not the one who should have been *giving*. Rather, because of the challenges she faced in her life, and the difficult reality of her position, she was actually the one who probably should have been *receiving*...

In these last few weeks of the year, we of course have begun planning for next year. Specifically, at our semi-annual meeting later today, we will have the opportunity to consider our congregation’s spending plan for the coming year. And our first consideration should be: Does this spending plan emphasize mission or maintenance ? (That is, maintenance in terms of simply *maintaining* what we have.) Does it emphasize outreach or inreach? Service or survival? The future or the present? Growth or the status quo?

What we need to keep in mind is that our offerings are not about giving to the church as an institution, or even to our congregation simply to pay the bills. Instead, our giving is really about following the biblical mandate to love our neighbor as ourselves. And how we can best do that *collectively as a congregation* by pooling our resources.

Or as Bruce Maples writes, “Where are the widows in *my* life, and do I care for them?”

Amen.