

Mark 12:38-44  
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There is a lot going on today. Many of our sister congregations in the UCC are celebrating Stewardship Sunday. It's Veterans Day, set aside as a day to honor and give thanks for all our country's veterans. It's the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War I, celebrated a year later by the creation of Armistice day which acknowledged the end of the war. Veterans Day originated in Armistice day. And today is the Sunday after a mid-term election which included ups and downs for most of us. Don't worry, this will not be a Politically charged sermon, but I think it is important to acknowledge what is going on in the world in which we seek to offer our gifts as the body of Christ.

As we hear the story of the widow's two cents, we gather with another opportunity to think about how we serve the highest ideals which have been handed down to us and proven over time: Grace and Forgiveness, Honesty and Service, Inclusion and peace, Freedom and Democracy, and God and Country.

We gather in Hales Corners this morning, and a little research uncovered some of the different messages which, over the years, have been attached to the welcome signs along the roads leading into our community. Hanging neatly below the Hales Corners welcome signs have been messages like: "Service above Self!" "Tree City USA!" And I am sure I have seen this one on Grange Ave, "Love for God and Country."

In the story today, Jesus points his disciples toward a woman, a widow, who offers her two cents to the temple. That's an interesting phrase isn't it; "putting in my two cents?" People usually use this phrase when they want to share an opinion. An online encyclopedia says the phrase is often used to "deprecate the opinion which is about to follow—suggesting its value is only two cents, a very small amount—the user of the phrase is trying to exercise politeness and humility, in hopes of lessening the impact of a possibly contentious statement. However, the article points out, 'my two cents' is also used, perhaps ironically, when one is expressing a strongly held opinion." Either way, the goal of using this phrase is as a sort of "lead in" when a person is going to express their own authentic thoughts in a moment when those thoughts may not be very easy to say or to hear. I wonder if we have considered what a tremendous gift it is when we share our authentic selves?

Rev. Cameron Trimble, CEO of the Center for Progressive Renewal recently attended the Parliament of the World's Religions in Toronto. She writes, "During one of the sessions, I posed this question: 'How do we create conditions so that what is best in each of us is brought forth as a gift to all of us?'"

I've considered this since leaving the conference. What can I do that invites you to show up fully as your real, authentic self? I've also considered, 'What courage must be demanded of us to allow us to show up as our authentic selves.' It works both ways.

I don't think we lack in 'showing up.' I think we do lack in being authentic in the act. Let's work on this together. I'm fairly sure the world doesn't need more people showing up as pretend contributors. What we all need, more than anything, are those who come ready to bring their best. The challenge is: our best is always what's most deeply authentic."

Numerous resources indicate there are tangible benefits to sharing our authentic selves. Our relationships become stronger and deeper. We experience congruence in our personhood and no longer become lost trying to be one person in one situation and another person in other situations. Thirdly, it is much easier to build honesty and trust in relationship when we show our true self from the start. Finally, our energy levels are higher because we don't have the tiring work of trying to be someone we are not.

So in the story of the widow's two cents, the church has often focused on the sacrifice, those two copper coins, pointing out that she gave all she had. But in light of the invitation to consider the gift of our authentic self, maybe the greatest gift this widow is giving is that she will not allow anything to stand in her way of being who God made her to be. No matter how little she has, she will not betray her authentic desire to give. No matter what ridicule she may endure for only giving two cents, she is going to demonstrate her commitment to the highest values of her community, trusting God. She won't just go through the motions, she is being clear about who she is as created by God.

In 1959, developmental Psychologist Erik Erikson, defined 8 stages of psychosocial development in human beings. In each stage of life, Erikson identified a crisis that he believed a person encountered; for instance, will a young child develop trust or mistrust, successfully navigating this crisis will result in the person developing a strong sense of Will. Will an adolescent develop a clear identity or role confusion? Success here will result in the person being able to accept others, even when there may be wide differences.

Will a middle adult experience a sense of making their mark in some way, or will they sense stagnation and feel they no longer have anything to contribute? Success in this crisis will result in developing a strong sense of care. Will, Fidelity, Care, these are among our highest ideals. And they are among Christ's highest hopes for us. If you read Ericson's work, you will recognize that the positive resolution to each crisis, comes as one is able, with courage and grace, to allow their most authentic self to flourish.

In the story of the widow, the woman is revealing that she has given up the illusion of self-preservation and she is making a concrete commitment to the highest ideals of our faith; God as the one who always loves us, Jesus as the one who has come to save, and the Holy Spirit as the constant assurance of God's companionship and source of all hope.

She is poor, or at least facing very tough times. Poverty is one of those life challenges that can push us give up who we are. Right, we hear people say, "I am not a thief, but I'd steal if that was the only way I could think to get food for my family." But there are other situations

too which tempt us to give up our highest ideals and blur our sense of who we are and whose we are.

This woman, in spite of numerous challenges; not having a husband, not having much money, not having power or position in society demonstrates the one thing no one can take from us, her relentless ability to be who God made her to be.

We see this example perfected when we look at Christ's death and resurrection. There is no evidence in the gospels that Jesus wanted to go to the cross, in fact we see him praying for the cup of suffering to be taken from him, but in the end, he puts his life in God's hands praying, "not my will but thine be done." Jesus demonstrated that no matter what he was up against, no matter what suffering he faced, he would continue to live perfectly in tune with the highest ideals of his faith.

So let me offer my own suggesting for a welcome sign to Emanuel, "Welcome to Emanuel, "Your two cents are always welcome here."

Amen