

**Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
November 11, 2012**

**Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell
“Abundance or Scarcity”
Text – Mark 12: 38-44**

What were you thinking as Marsha read today’s Gospel? Was it “how did this text happen to come up on the day when the rector is preaching about our fall giving campaign?” I must confess that I had those thoughts when I first discovered the assigned readings. How apt! The poor widow who gives her last two coins to the Temple! And I’m sure there have been many sermons preached that lifted her up as a model of sacrificial giving. A model that all of us should emulate.

Well, this is indeed the day for preaching about giving. But I am not going to follow that path. I’m not going to ask all of you to put your last dollars in the offering plate! As I went deeper into this text, it became clear that there is more going on here. The writer of Mark placed the story of the widow’s mite, as it is generally known, in the midst of Jesus’ final trip to Jerusalem. A trip where amongst his teachings, he challenges the rich young man whose material goods stand in the way of his following Jesus, he prophecies about the destruction of the Temple, and has several confrontations with the Temple authorities.

Today’s text begins with one of those confrontations. It is a critique of the scribe’s practice of strutting around in rich robes and of indulging in long prayers – all about attracting attention to themselves, of exercising their power and authority and privilege as representa-tives of the institutional Temple. Jesus says that they devour widows’ houses, a reference perhaps to how some of the scribes “help manage” the estates of the widows’ deceased husbands, and extract nice commissions for themselves. He notes the money the scribes give to the Temple, sometimes a lot of money. But compared to their abundance, it is a drop in the bucket, pocket change.

Imagine now the scene on the Temple Mount. The collection boxes are in the courts of the Temple, not inside the sacred space. This is a busy place, bustling with people, animals, vendors and commerce. Noisy. Public. And the sound of the coins dropping into the collection boxes is loud. It brings yet more attention to those scribes, more recognition for their contributions.

Not so with the poor widow. Her two pennies barely make a sound. She is invisible to all – except to Jesus who is watching. As a widow in that society, she has no status. She is entirely dependent on others for her very survival. Yet she drops her pennies into the collection box. We don’t know why. Is she giving out of her desire and devotion? Or is this yet another temple tax that she must pay? We generally think that Jesus is praising her for giving all that she has. But that is not explicit. He might just as well be lamenting the

system, the institution that is exploiting the poor rather than protecting them. That is lining the pockets of the privileged at their expense.

Such exploitation is not just an ancient problem. It is here and now as we have and continue to experience in this country. It is certainly in Sudan where people fleeing Khartoum and arriving in Renk have been relieved of whatever money and possessions they may have had, being made even more destitute than before.

Some add to their own abundance by making the scarcity of others worse. Jesus remarks on two kinds of giving – the scribes giving out of their abundance in a way that does not really make any difference to their lifestyles and the poor widow giving out of her scarcity. It is the latter that he holds up to the disciples.

Today, I believe we think about abundance and scarcity in a different way. At least for those of us who, compared to the majority of the world's people, live in abundance. It has become more of an attitude – how we perceive what we have. Walter Brueggemann, theologian and teacher of preaching, calls them different ideologies. The underlying question is whether there are enough goods in our world to go around. The ideology of scarcity says “no” so we scramble around to get and save all we can. And we hold on to what we have. We hoard – even if that means that others go without.

An ideology of abundance knows that there *is* enough for all, as long as we take only what we need. Brueggemann tells us a curious fact: that as the gap between those who have and those who do not widens, it is the “haves” who operate out of the ideology of scarcity and the poor, out of abundance.

Jesus ministered to people who suffered from scarcity – scarcity of good health, scarcity of community and he returned them to abundance. He tried to penetrate the *illusion* of scarcity and act out the *reality* of abundance. He taught often about the dangers of possessions and money – how they come to possess and control us, how they squeeze out God and neighbor.

These stories were not just for the ancient world of the 1st century. They are just as pertinent for us now. In our world today, it is hard for us to trust in abundance. Our market economy is built on a scarcity model where competition, the power of a few, and even war are the means of solving problems. The scarcity model fuels our anxiety, telling us of all the things we need to be happy and successful. We worry about not having enough – enough goods, enough time, enough money for retirement and medical care. We save and we hoard and we are careful about giving anything away.

Educator Parker Palmer says that the quality of our lives depends on whether we assume scarcity or abundance. Unlike the anxiety and competitiveness of scarcity, abundance is about generosity, community, and cooperation.

Palmer reminds us that community and abundance go hand in hand. That some things you might otherwise need to spend money on are no longer necessary when you are in community. This makes sense. It helps explain why it is that some of the poor communities

don't appear to be in the despair we might expect of those who, according to our standards, have nothing. I have never been in Sudan, but I have spent time in rural villages in Kenya, in Guatemala, and even impoverished communities here in the U.S. One of the things that often surprises travelers is the joy and faith we find in the midst of the poverty we see. We can't imagine how those who live with so little can possibly find such joy. What we learn is how the community – the relationships and support that it provides – make up for and maybe even exceeds what satisfaction could come from possessions and money.

It seems to me that when we operate out of an assumption of scarcity, we act in one of two ways. We either hoard what we have out of fear of running short, in which case, we choke off the Spirit by holding too tightly. Or we squander what we have, letting it randomly dribble away. Then the Spirit gets lost in our lack of focus.

It is not easy to shift our point of view. Being generous people depends upon how we look at life – if we are unable to see what we already have – the abundance of blessings we have received from a loving, creating God, we will continue hold our possessions too tightly. But as God becomes more central to our lives, we begin to shift – we begin to be free of the hold of our possessions. We begin to be more grateful and to care that others have enough, too.

I do not know how you will go about filling out your pledge card this year. Maybe you will use the table in the letter you will receive to calculate a percentage of giving. Maybe you will simply look at what you are giving right now and calculate a small increase. However you go about it, I would encourage you to make it more than a mechanical exercise. Think about it prayerfully, talk it over with family members. Ask what it is that God has entrusted to you and how it should best be used.

And try to see clearly what you already have – individually, in your family, and in this faith community. See the blessings that God has given – the abundance that is part of our lives. Give thanks. Open your heart and your hands to the extent that you are able. For, what if we – God's stewards of all gifts – are the link between our Creator's generosity and our neighbors' needs? What if *we* are what makes the difference between scarcity and abundance?