

“Nothing Held Back”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
Western Boulevard Presbyterian Church – Raleigh, NC  
November 14, 2021

**Mark 12: 38-44**

So, last week I shared with you a lot of formal introductions about me. Today, I’m going to share with you some fun facts about Frank, as it were. The search committee doesn’t even know these, and they’re probably squirming in their seats right now thinking, “Oh dear Lord, what is he going to say?” Relax – nothing that will make you regret your decision!

First, when I was in elementary school in Memphis, Tennessee, I was in an opera. About six of us from my school were selected to have a small singing part in a production by the Memphis Opera. All I remember was I had to wear Middle Eastern costumes, with a turban, lots of makeup, and we sang in German. To this day, I can remember the tune but not the words.

Second, I have seen nearly every episode of the television shows “Friends” and “Law and Order,” the original series. Debbie and I have successfully brainwashed our daughters into loving “Friends” like we did when we were their age. And anytime I see a “Law and Order” episode on cable, I can almost always tell you the ending. Why my brain retains that knowledge and not more essential, important information is beyond me.

Finally, in the category of “who do you know that is famous,” I went to high school with the actress, Jennifer Garner. Jennifer and I graduated together in the class of 1990 from George Washington High School in Charleston, West Virginia. She and I were marching band geeks – I played the trombone, she played the saxophone. Our sophomore year, our concert band played at Carnegie Hall in New York City, and after the concert the band took a dinner cruise out in the harbor. And I sat at a table of four with Jennifer and two of my friends. (Debbie is rolling her eyes right now!) She wouldn’t know me from Adam now. But every time she comes on the television with a commercial for Capital One or Neutrogena, I say, “Hey BFF!” (Best Friends Forever).

Name dropping – we all do that, don’t we? We’re in a conversation with someone, and we make a point to say who we know that is well-known. It’s another example of how we as humans are always tempted to want to feel important, even if it’s at the expense of someone else’s esteem. We don’t mind the extra attention it brings us, or the notoriety we feel. It’s a tendency which we all can fall into because we are imperfect, fallible, creatures of God.

When I first read this passage, I felt a bit uncomfortable. Did you notice what Jesus does? He goes off on the religious establishment, who wanted to be looked at as superior to those they served. Jesus’ condemnation of the scribes was primarily because they were extremely corrupt and preyed upon the financial status of those in their synagogues. They used their religious standing to get the nicest meals, the seats of honor at the table, the bows and curtsies of respect as they walked around town. They put on a show of religious piety, when in fact they were deceiving the very people they served.

Today, the church is not nearly the same corrupt institution. But this opening volley by Jesus still hits me in a certain way, as I'm sure it does for you, too. All of us can have a certain air of authority, whether it be in our work, our hobbies, our experience in the church or elsewhere. We've all appreciated the remarks of respect, the places of honor which we feel we have earned and deserve. That air of superiority creeps in and distorts reality, not all at once, but over a gradual period of time. Before we know it, we are offended and taken aback whenever someone else has the nerve to challenge us.

I wonder if that is why Jesus notices the widow who comes to give her offering to the church. Instead of all the high priests and scribes who everyone always looks at, he instead notices this old lady, stooped over and unassuming. In front of her are the rich and wealthy, bringing large sums of money to add to the treasury. But all she bears in her hands are two copper coins, which would be like putting a few pennies in the offering plate today. "How dare he notice her and not me, as I place so much more money in the treasury! What about my good deeds? What about all the respect and honor and status I hold in the community? How dare Jesus notice her, and not me!"

Jesus addresses this reaction in the following way: "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." The rich contributed out of abundance, while the poor widow gave out of her poverty. Abundance versus poverty. They gave part of what they had. She gave all that she had – she held nothing back.

A pastor friend of mine in Charlotte used to say that it's not what you give that matters, it's what you hang onto that matters (Rev. Ed Wilson). Does that ring true for you, especially as you hear this story? Often when the end of the year comes, and we are budgeting for the next year, we first take into account our resources and then our expenses. We see what it will cost to maintain our home, to pay for necessities such as food and clothing and medical care, and so on. We determine what we need to save aside for emergencies and future savings, and possible entertainment and recreation for us and our families. More often than not, we look first at what we are keeping, before we determine what we are going to give away to others, whether it's the church or to other charities.

The widow did not have resources to review, or budgets to compare from the previous year. She didn't have to think about how to pay for the necessities of life because she lived her life without them – food, clothing, a home, were all items for which she simply scraped by each and every day. She did not first think about what she was going to hang on to, because in all honesty, she had practically nothing to keep. So instead, she came to the treasury and placed in the box what she had, and she kept nothing for herself.

You can make the argument that she isn't the best example of stewardship and sacrifice because of the institution she was giving to. As we discussed earlier, the church at that time was very corrupt, and likely her money would not be used to help others who were poor, but rather to feed and clothe those arrogant scribes Jesus so fiercely condemned at the beginning. Why should we lift this poor widow up, anyway?

Barbara Brown Taylor comments that perhaps Jesus saw her in a slightly different light: *She reminded him of someone. It was the end for her; it was the end for him, too. She gave her living to a corrupt church; he was about to give his life for a corrupt world. She withheld nothing from God; neither did he. It took one to know one. When he looked at her it was like looking into a mirror at a reflection so clear that he called his disciples over to see. 'Look,' he said to those who meant to follow him. 'That is what I have been talking about. Look at her'* (*The Preaching Life, 130-131*).

That is why we give. That is why we contribute. That is why we come to the treasury box and drop in the last two coins to our name. Not because we feel guilty or proud, but because we rejoice that another has already emptied himself for our very sake. Jesus was the offering to a corrupt world, and he has transformed that world into something beautiful because of his gracious act. If we're not giving to God for that reason, then we need to reexamine the real reason we all are here.

Money is idolatrous. It causes greed, want, and loss of perspective when we focus entirely on its power. Why else do you think Jesus spends so much time talking about it throughout his earthly ministry? Unfortunately, we also bring that idolatry into the church. We see the collection of the offering as an interruption of our worship service, a time when we are asked to make our charitable donation so that the earthly obligations of the church might be met.

Instead of an interruption, though, it should be seen as an integral part of worship. That is because it is the one moment when we can respond to the Word of God in a significant and positive way. It is when we say we are totally dependent on God, and we give back to God what first came from God. It is when we focus first on what we give away, and not on what we hold onto. It is when we realize that all of us are poor, no matter our material wealth, and the joy which comes from giving out of poverty is no match for giving out of abundance.

Thirteen years ago, I was blessed to be part of the Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program. It brought together 16 pastors across Indiana who were anywhere between 5-10 years into their pastoral ministry. It has been a group that you will hear me talk about over the course of my ministry with you, because that experience and those friends have made a lasting impact on my life and ministry.

In our first year, we were blessed to travel as a group to Chiapas, Mexico, and part of our visit was timed to witness the Day of the Dead celebrations. Throughout Mexico, these are an integral part of the people's remembrance of their family who has died, and their spiritual connection with them in the present. It not only was different than anything we would experience here, it was incredibly personal to witness families of all sizes gather at the cemeteries to honor and remember their ancestors.

One of those experiences was at a small village outside of San Cristobal, where our group was invited to be guests at a special Catholic mass for the Day of the Dead. We were crammed into this little church with all the villagers, and we stood for two hours throughout the mass. Although the service was all in Spanish and Tzutzil, the native indigenous language, we all felt God's presence in that worship experience.

The entire service was overwhelming, but what happened afterwards was like coming face-to-face with the widow in the synagogue. After the people had paid homage to the dead in the cemetery, they came bringing gifts for us. There was atole, which was a warm drink served in a wooden bowl. There was a tamale, consisting of beans and corn, and wrapped in a huge leaf. And there was bread fruit, which is commonplace throughout the Caribbean, and has a tough exterior but a soft interior. Each of us did our best to eat what we could, although the flavors and aromas were not the easiest for us to take! We then learned that the community had prepared chicken soup for all 20 of us – which required them to kill two chickens so that we could eat. Unfortunately, we could not stay for the meal because we had another scheduled commitment. Thankfully, the soup would not go to waste, as what they had prepared would literally feed the entire village that day.

It was incredibly humbling to realize that these people had made such a generous and gracious act toward us without any motivation other than being hospitable. For in their gracious act, those villagers deposited their two copper coins in the treasury, showing all of us what it meant to be faithful givers of all that God has given to us.

I would invite you to follow the poor widow to the treasury, and learn the wealth of love which awaits you when you give God your life, and are willing to receive what God will offer you in return.

Thanks be to God. Amen.