

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

I try to stay ahead when it comes to the Divine Service schedule, identifying special activities, choosing hymns, scheduling those who are assisting, etc. I was not successful here in November, as you can tell, for if I had been, we would have sent the stewardship letter out a bit earlier, and we would have scheduled the return of the pledge cards for today. The Old Testament and Gospel lessons have a strong emphasis on that very topic. They make us ponder: what has God done for us? And what about the future? How do we respond?

Today we find Jesus in the temple, the one “*made with hands,*” as He was preparing to reenter the heavenly temple. It was the week of His destiny. He was about to fulfill the purpose for which He was sent, making “*the sacrifice of himself*” “*once for all*” people of every time and place, making that one-time sacrifice that bore “*the sins of many*” and put them away. Yes, our text takes place shortly before Jesus is betrayed into the hands of sinful men and hung as a sacrifice upon the tree of the cross for the sins of the world.

Jesus was in the temple. He had entered into Jerusalem riding on a donkey’s foal, acclaimed the Son of David to shouts of “*Hosanna!*” In Jerusalem, Jesus went to the temple to continue His teaching. He had cleansed the temple, turning over tables and chasing out the moneychangers. And today, Jesus is back in the temple teaching and observing.

When we think of the temple, we might think of the Holy Place where the prayers are offered up for the people, or the Holy of Holies where only the High Priest could enter. Or maybe we think of the Court of the Priests where the altar was where the sacrifices were made. Jesus wasn’t in any of these places ... they’re not where the teaching would take place. That was on the outer perimeter in the colonnaded areas of the temple where even the Gentiles could go. That’s likely where He warned about the hypocrisy of the scribes, “*who devour[ed] widows’ houses and for [show made] long prayers.*”

But then Jesus moved into the Court of the Women and sat down in the courtyard next to a treasury, or an offering box. There, he observed the people.

Rich people came by and offered up great sums of money. Jesus observed it, but didn’t speak a word, not of commendation or condemnation, for surely there is nothing sinful about being rich, nor is there anything wrong with rich people being generous and sharing what they have. The problem with having riches is always in their allure, tugging at people’s hearts to place their “*hopes on the uncertainty of riches, [rather than] on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy*” (1 Tim. 6:17). As Jesus taught, “*where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*” (Matt. 6:21). With Jesus as our treasure, the Christian, rich and poor, look “*to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share ...*” (1 Tim.

6:17-18). Nothing wrong at all with these “*rich people*” putting their “*large sums*” into the offering box.

But Jesus really took notice when He observed a poor widow put her last two copper coins into the offering box. For that, Jesus called His disciples over to teach them. For that extraordinary generosity, Jesus commended her; for although her gift was objectively small, yet comparatively it was much more than the rich had contributed. Jesus said, she “*has put in more than all*” the others, because she “*has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.*”

“How could she do that?” you might ask. Of all people, she surely had an excuse to give nothing! “I need it to live on! God will understand!” How could she give her last penny? She trusted in the Lord.

We don’t know how this widow did after this extraordinary gift. We don’t hear about her again. But surely she was blessed, for she trusted that the Lord, who “*is good,*” whose “*steadfast love endures forever,*” who “*raises up the needy out of affliction.*” She trusted that He would indeed take care of her. She trusted in the promises of the Lord, perhaps like another widow, of whom she had likely heard, a widow, not even an Israelite, in another time and place, whom God took care of by providing a constant supply of flour and oil as she took care of the prophet Elijah!

Last Sunday was All Saints Day. We remembered certain saints who had joined the heavenly multitude that no one can number. The writer to the Hebrews lists some great examples of faith who did extraordinary things, a “*great ... cloud of witnesses*” that surround us (Heb. 12:1) ... like Noah who at God’s word built a huge ark on dry land; like Abraham who at God’s command moved to a place unknown; like Abraham and Sarah who believed God’s promise that in their old age they would bear a son by whom all the world would be blessed; like Abraham again later as he endured God’s command to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, the son of promise. And yet as least as great as these is this poor widow, who without explicit command or promise — only the promise of God’s great love for the afflicted — gave “*everything she had, all she had to live on.*”

And yet, it’s not simply because of her great faith that we should find this poor widow intriguing, but because of whom we see in her and what she did, as our first distribution hymn highlights. For we should see in her action Christ Himself. Who was it that gave up everything at the behest of the Father? Who was it that was so poor and lowly as to be born among the livestock, laid in a manger? Who was it that was driven from His home to dwell in a foreign land when His life was in danger? Who was it that during His ministry had nowhere to lay His head? Who was it that was arrested though He had committed no crime? Who was it that was mocked, scourged, humiliated, hung on a tree to die for sins He did not commit? Who gave everything He had, all He had to live on — His very lifeblood, His very

last breath— a “*sacrifice of Himself*” for the kingdom of God? Here’s what you’ll sing: “At last He brought His offering And laid it on a tree; There gave Himself, His life, His love For all humanity” (LSB787:4).

Yes, see in this widow the incredible thing Christ has done for you— He “*was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich*” (2 Cor. 8:9). Then see in the widow a great example of trust in the Lord as you yourselves consider your response to His love. You should have received a letter asking you to ponder with prayer all that God has done for you in Christ and all the ways He has blessed you, and then asking you to return the pledge card, not today, but by next Sunday. I pray you will.

Are you rich? Do you have an abundance; I pray you will pledge and give generously, even sacrificially. Are you poor? Your financial gift may be much smaller; your offering may be mainly in hands and feet that help around the church, your body offered up as a living sacrifice to the Lord (Rom. 12:1). Both offerings to the Lord are praiseworthy, as is another:: the sacrifice of praise, “*the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name*” (Heb. 13:15).

And you can rest assured . . . although in Jesus’ day people would sit around the treasury in the temple and watch the people putting in their coins, I’ll not do that myself. I’ll not check on your pledge or its fulfillment. Oh, yes, there will be those who will compile the numbers and report, but I’ll not do that. That is between you and the Lord. I will simply trust the Lord that He will care for His church, for His Zion, through you, even as you will trust in the Lord for His goodness, as did the widow of Zarephath, as did the widow in the temple. “*Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!*”

I close with this prayer—again from our first distribution hymn: “Lord, help us all, with You, to yield Whatever love demands And freely give, as You have giv’n With open hearts and hands” (LSB787:5).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.