

Investing in the Temple 2.0

Mark 12:38 – 13:2

³⁸As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

⁴¹He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴For 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.” ¹³As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” ²Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

Jesus is now in the treasury. It might not seem like a big deal, but it is. Jesus is in economic heart of the temple. In addition to cultic functions, the temple may have been the richest institution in the entire Roman empire. It had incalculable wealth and was a massive financial organization. If you were a farmer who needed a loan, the temple offered loan programs using the deeds to their land as collateral. Over time, what was originally meant to be the house of God had an oppressive underside that caused suffering as well. It’s why in the Book of Revelation the people rejoice when the temple is destroyed. So there Jesus is watching as the wealthy give out of their abundance—maybe out of devotion or success or hoping for brownie points. But then he sees a widow who empties her pockets which only contain a couple coins and he turns it into a teachable moment. “Look at her,” he says, “Everyone else give out of their abundance, but she gives out of her poverty.”

We hear Jesus’ words and wonder: what was his tone like when he says this? Is Jesus excited, noticing the widow’s spectacular generosity? Or is he speaking with contempt, judging an oppressive institution for taking all she had? We can’t say for certain because we miss the tone—and our pets will tell us tone is everything! If I said to you, “Get out of here!”, as in “You can’t be serious!” or “OMG!” it sounds different than “Get out of here!” No trespassing! One is playful, the other is a threat. Same words. Different tone. Different meaning.

So we need to dig a bit deeper to get underneath what is happening. You see, in Jesus’ time, there was a shift beginning to happen as to how people understood the temple. Some still held it in esteem, others saw it as a stale tradition that was no longer relevant. The people began to question the need for temple priests, which is why it says the scribes are wearing long robes and

reciting long prayers as to act holy outside of the temple. The temple, according to how Jesus saw it, was coming to an end. “Not one stone left,” he says. All the cultic functions and wealth won’t matter anymore. He’s desacralizing the temple because what is sacred are the people. So there is an amazing indifference Jesus has regarding the temple. So we might imagine him speaking with a tone of sadness when he sees a poor widow contributing to that which is no longer about to exist. Yes, he’s sad because the temple has failed her. But he’s also sad because she’s wasting her money. Of course, the widow is also a primary example about what generous discipleship looks like, but for the moment all those contributions to a system which is ultimately about to be swept away is, from Jesus’ point-of-view, totally pointless.

Well, it’s not a great stewardship message, is it? But it does raise the question about what we are investing in. As some of you know, before seminary I was the music director of a PCUSA church plant in the suburbs of Chicago. We started by worshiping in the store front. Then raised funds to build a building. Things started off well. We ran a day care out of the facility. Guests flooded in. Then, sadly, there was a situation which split the church in half. Eventually the church couldn’t support the overhead and had to close. That was about ten years ago. But the amazing thing about that church is, still to this day, the people get together every now and again to have dinner at each other’s homes. Sometimes they do service projects together. The building didn’t survive, but the relationships did. And isn’t that what really matters?

Yes, it’s commitment Sunday. Yes, we make our pledges and commitments for an uncertain future. Yes, a majority of our budget goes toward the building and the pastor’s salary and none of us want to waste our money. But the truth is, even without a building—or a pastor—we would still be a church because we invest in each other. How we offer Parker rides to dialysis. How we lift up Sue as she recovers from chemo. How we marvel at the gifts and stories each one of you brings. This church is a cornucopia of amazing and talented people who care about bringing justice and equity into the world. And while we all know Covid has changed how we do church, it hasn’t changed that we *are a church—we are the temple 2.0!* I think it is safe to say that when we invest in one other, the rest takes care of itself.

For Bea’s funeral, we used this story. Bea was someone who gave all she had. She didn’t do it because she was supposed to. She didn’t do it out of obligation, but out of gratitude. Trinity was her family. Trinity was her home. And out of her gratitude for you, she gave all she had. She was a disciple who understood that what she gave away could not be wasted. Why? Because what she invested in was us. So perhaps this story isn’t *that bad* of a stewardship story after all.

Yes, we need volunteers—and we can’t have the same people doing all the stuff. Yes, we need money to keep the institution going. Yes, we need your pledge cards turned in even if it is \$0 so we can get an idea of where we are at headed into the new year. But the gospel truth is, even if there is not one stone left, we would still be the church because the love of God we share with each other and the world would remain and cannot be wasted. And perhaps, despite all the uncertainty of the future, that is the central truth we can bank on.