

“Whose Shoes are You Wearing?”

Mark 12:41-44

23rd Sunday after Pentecost

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Ben Dorr

A number of years ago, the mother of one of our son’s friends called our house in a bit of a panic.

It was 7am.

It was her first day back to work after being on maternity leave. At the time, she had an 8-week-old baby and a second grader.

Do you mind if I stop by your house this morning? she asked. Of course we don’t mind. What’s going on?

In her scramble to get out the door, she did not notice that her older son—the second grader—got into the car WITHOUT HIS SHOES ON!

She drove him half-way to school before she figured out that he was just wearing socks!

No time to return home, so they came by our house.

We looked for a pair of OUR second grader’s shoes to see if they would fit. None of them fit.

So we looked for shoes that our older son used to wear, to see if any of those would work.

We found a pair.

They fit ok...I should say, they worked for that day, because they had to work. But they didn’t fit exactly right.

And I thought to myself:

It’s hard to wear somebody else’s shoes.

Isn't that right?

Have you ever tried to put yourself in someone else's shoes before?

It can be a challenging thing to try to see the world the way that another person sees the world...

Just think for a moment about the national election this past week.

Have you ever tried to walk around in the shoes of a person who voted OPPOSITE of you? When you do that, do you do it with curiosity, like "I wonder where that person is coming from?" Or do you think, "Where in the world is that person coming from?"

Or have you ever considered what the past 8 months have felt like for someone who is, say 20 years older than you? Or someone 20 years younger than you?

Do you see what I mean?

To see the world the way that other people see the world.
It's a challenge to put on someone else's shoes.

But this morning, I'd like to ask you to do that.
I'd like you to walk around a bit in the shoes of the woman in our text.

According to Mark, there was a day when Jesus was watching people put money in the treasury. Many rich people put in lots of money...and a poor widow put in two copper coins, worth a penny.

Jesus says of her:

“...but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

Can you imagine what it's like to walk in this woman's shoes?
She put in everything she had...why did she do it?

When I invite you to put on her shoes, I'm asking you to consider what it's like to make a commitment.

That's an appropriate thing to do on Commitment Sunday.
This Sunday when we make a promise, a pledge to our church.
What is it like to make a commitment?

Because that's what that widow did with her two coins—she made a commitment.

And sometimes making a commitment—
not just with money, but with anything...
it can make a person a bit nervous.

I recall what happened the week before I asked my wife to marry me. I had met Heather's folks, and I really liked them, and I thought they felt pretty good about me.

But I also knew that Heather was their only daughter.

And I knew that I needed to share my plans with her folks ahead of time, I knew needed to talk with her father.

So I made the phone call. I remember practicing ahead of time, saying over and over: “I’m going to ask Heather to marry me, and I’m calling to ask your blessing.”

I made the call, Heather’s father answered.
We talked for 5 or 10 minutes, I hung up, and I thought...yeah.
I was calm. I was cool. I was collected.

Now Heather’s father remembers that conversation too.
Calm, cool, and collected?
NOT the words that *HE* uses to describe how I sounded.

More like: ***“I’m going to ask Heather to marry me,
and I’m calling to ask your blessing.”***

And I suppose he’s right.
I was a little nervous.

But if we’re talking about the widow in our text for today, I don’t get the feeling that she was nervous when she made her commitment.

I don’t feel like I’m walking in the shoes of an anxious person.
Or a person who’s giving because they’ll feel guilty if they don’t.

I feel like I’m in the shoes of a GRATEFUL person.
A person who knows what she has been given in this life.
A person who knows how thankful she is for the gift of life.

May I suggest that’s why you and I make our commitments today too?

- Because of our gratitude for God’s gift of life, we make a commitment.

- Because we are created in the image of a generous God, we make our generous commitment.
- Because we want others to experience the joy and gratitude that God intends for them, we make a commitment.

In his bestselling book *Being Mortal*, Dr. Atul Gawande tells the story of a nursing home that went through some unusual changes.

Back in the early 1990s, a young doctor named Bill Thomas had just taken a new job as medical director of Chase Memorial Nursing Home in upstate New York.

There were 80 residents in this facility, and all of them faced a myriad of problems—physical disabilities, Alzheimer’s, other forms of dementia. As one might imagine, it was a depressing place, particularly to a 31-year-old doctor who had never worked in a nursing home before.

Dr. Thomas tried to fix the despair he saw by using his familiar bag of tricks—ordering scans, altering medications—maybe this will improve the residents’ lives—but it was all to no avail.

Did Dr. Thomas give up on the nursing home, go find a more rewarding way to practice medicine? No, no...he doubled down on his commitment.

Dr. Thomas came up with a different diagnosis.
As Gawande puts it in his book:

“He came to think the missing ingredient in this nursing home was life itself, and he decided to try an experiment to inject some.”

What did Dr. Thomas order?

He decided that the facility needed more living things:

plants, and animals, and children.

He approached his boss.

He asked his boss for two dogs, even though the state regulations allowed for only one.

“All right, I’ll put it down,” said his boss. “I’m really not into this as much as you are, but I’ll put two dogs down.”

Dr. Thomas said, “Now, what about cats?”

“What about cats? We’ve got two dogs down on paper.”

Dr. Thomas replied, “Some people aren’t dog lovers. They like cats.”

“You want dogs AND cats?”

“Let’s put it down for discussion purposes.”

“Okay, I’ll put a cat down.”

“No, no, no,” said Dr. Thomas. “We’re two floors. How about two cats on both floors?”

“We want to propose to the health department two dogs and four cats?”

“One more thing,” said Dr. Thomas. “What about birds?”

“No birds allowed in nursing homes.”

“But what about birds?”

“How many birds are you talking about...?”

“Let’s put one hundred.”

“ONE HUNDRED BIRDS? IN THIS PLACE?”

Long story short, Dr. Thomas convinced not just his boss, but the state of New York to grant exceptions to their rules, and before anyone knew it, the nursing home staff brought their kids to work with them (after the kids got out of school)—

and a garden was planted in the back of facility,
a playground for the kids was installed...and the animals arrived.

Not one at a time.
The animals arrived all at once.

It was “total pandemonium” Dr. Thomas remembered.
There were parakeet feathers flying everywhere, the staff was busy chasing the birds to try to get them in their cages.

And what were the residents doing?
“They laughed their butts off,” Dr. Thomas said.

But over time, the residents also did something else.

“People who we had believed weren’t able to speak started speaking,” Dr. Thomas said. “People who had been completely withdrawn and non-ambulatory started coming to the nurses’ station and saying, ‘I’ll take the dog for a walk.’”

Over time, the statistics came in too:
Medication-use? Going down.
The death rate? Going down.

Chase Memorial Nursing Home was no longer the depressing place it used to be.

“All the parakeets were adopted and named by the residents,” Gawande writes, but even more importantly, “The lights turned back on in people’s eyes.”¹

¹ Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*, New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2014.

Do you see what can happen when someone makes a commitment?

That's why I'm so proud to serve this congregation.

Westminster has a rich history of making commitments that literally give other people life.

Whether it's people who are temporarily without a home, or people who are struggling for food, or children at Thornwell who need a stable place to live...your commitments, your pledges, go a long, long way toward providing LIFE, toward bringing the light back on in people's eyes.

When I imagine what it's like to be in the shoes of the widow in our text, I'm not picturing a down-in-the-dumps person. I picture a woman with a spring in her step, a light in her eyes.

She knew what it was to be a grateful person, because she knew she was God's person.

When Jesus says of her:

“she...has put in everything she had, all she had to live on...”
—the Greek here actually reads: “her whole life.”

She gave her whole life.

That's what it means at the deepest level when we make our pledge to the church.

We don't pledge just to make the budget.

We don't even pledge simply because others in our community need it.

We pledge because WE need it.
 We are saying to God—I belong to you.
 We are saying to God—everything I have, it comes from you.

The late, great preacher Fred Craddock tells the story of the time he was pastor of a small church in a little town in Oklahoma. At one time, there were four churches in this town:

a Methodist church, a Baptist church,
 a Nazarene church, and a Christian church.

Each church had its share of the population on Wednesday nights and Sunday mornings. Attendance rose and fell, but the best and most consistent attendance in town was at the little café.

Where all the pickup trucks parked,
 and all the men were inside,
 discussing the weather, and cattle,
 and wheat bugs, and hail and wind...

And all the while, their wives and sons and daughters were in one of those four churches.

So the churches had good attendance and poor attendance, but that café had consistently good attendance. Better attendance than some of those churches.

Those men were always there.

Once in a while, they would lose a member at the café because their wives finally got to them, so you'd see them go sheepishly off to one of the churches.

But the men at the café always felt strong.
 "We're the biggest and best group in town," they said.

They weren't bad men—they were good men, family men,
hard-working men.

The patron saint of the group that met at the café was named Frank.

Frank was 77.

A good person,

a pioneer, rancher, farmer—

he had prospered, he had his credentials,

“Ol' Frank—he'll never go to church.”

Frank was a friendly man, he'd talk with anybody, including the preachers when he bumped into them at the café. The talk was of politics or the weather—he'd visit with them, but in every conversation, he had his saying down:

“You know me. I work hard, I take care of my family,
and I mind my own business.

Everything else is fluff.”

It was Frank's way of saying, “Don't bother. I'm not a prospect.”

So one Sunday morning, one of those preachers got a big surprise.

In fact, the whole church was surprised, the whole town was surprised, and the men at the café were absolutely dumbfounded when ol' Frank presented himself at one of those churches for baptism.

Of course, the community got to talking:

“Frank must be sick.”

“Guess he's scared to meet his maker.”

“Went and got baptized? Never thought he’d do that, but I guess when you get scared...”

Well, the next day Frank was back at the café, talking with Dr. Craddock.

“Frank, do you remember that saying you used to give me so much? I work hard, I take care of my family, and I mind my own business...?”

“Yeah, I remember that.”

“You still say that?”

“Yeah, yeah, I still say that.”

“Then what’s the difference?”

“I didn’t know then what my business was.”²

Now I was going to ask you to put yourself in Frank’s shoes for a moment.

When Frank was invited by his church to make a pledge, a commitment...do you think Frank went back home and said, “This is mine, and this is mine, and this mine, and there’s no way that God is getting this...”

Or do you think that he looked at all that he had, all that he had been given, and he made another commitment, a generous pledge, because of all that had been given to him?

What do you think he did?

² This story is told in one of Dr. Craddock’s sermons from Cherry Log Christian Church, in Cherry Log, Georgia, and is told in “Craddock Stories,” edited by Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2001.

I was going to ask you that question.
But the truth is, I don't want you to put on Frank's shoes.
I want you to wear your own shoes.

The shoes of someone who knows that she has been claimed by
God, the shoes of someone who knows the precious gift of life that God
has given him...

I want you to put on those shoes right now.

And before you place your pledge in the offering basket when you
leave today, or before you come to our Pledge Thru this afternoon, ask
yourself: What kind of commitment faithfully expresses my gratitude
for all that God has given me?

Amen.