

**Stewardship Sunday Sermon, 11-13-2022**  
**Based on Luke 21**

**Dear church,**

Regarding the gospel for this Sunday... I have always wondered whether Luke told this as a teaching story, a parable almost... or whether this episode was something that just happened one day. Jesus and his disciples were sauntering around, strolling near the Temple, sitting down for a moment of rest. Looking up he noticed this widow. How did he know that she was a widow? It might have been an assumption based on her destitute situation and age, who knows? Or maybe the woman was better known to him than this short story reveals. Maybe he knew her by name, knew that she had lost her husband, had seen her many times hanging around the Temple gates. We often see destitute people near churches and houses of worship in the big cities, looking for a donation. Positioned prominently, they ask visitors for a few coins. A church is still a symbol of grace and compassion. When I walked through the city of Frankfurt, Germany earlier this year, we took a side trip to the Cathedral. I remembered that there was always a person asking for alms in front of the Frankfurt Cathedral and there was one on that day in late May. It was kind of reassuring. Nothing much has changed.

But in this short story, all of four verses long, the tables are turned, which doesn't surprise us. Jesus loved turning tables. He literally turned the tables full of money in that famous outburst toward the money exchangers in the Temple when he showed a rare expression of anger at the commercialization of religion. But more frequently he turned tables in the way people are thinking about life and God, religion, and things like giving... He loved changing our perspective, highlighting examples of individuals who contradicted the standard narratives in society. The bad Samaritan label was destroyed by the story of the Good Samaritan. A heathen Roman officer, part of the occupying force, naturally distrusted, became an example of faith so impressive, that Jesus remarked he hadn't found such confidence in God anywhere else in Judea. The dreaded tax collectors who enforced the fiscal demands of the Empire appear several times as decent, remorseful people. And now this story. The poor widow doesn't take alms, no, she gives to the

Temple Treasury, which ironically supported welfare causes. She puts in her two pennies, is as generous as she can be. You know, the story is almost too good to be true! Did it happen or was this one of Jesus' Rabbinic tales, carefully constructed to provoke deeper thinking on our part?

My take is: it probably happened! Sometimes, when you open your eyes, it is amazing what stories take place in real life. You can't make the stuff up. Here is an idea... how about we collect all the stories that people in our parish have experienced which are hard to believe. I bet we could write a book that is better than fiction, don't you think? I will always remember being gifted a few coins by a homeless person when I was working for a homeless ministry in that same city, Frankfurt, Germany. I ran into him totally out of context, and he gave me the coins I needed to make an important phone call. They still had public phone booths in those days. I couldn't have made that story up. God turned the tables on me in that moment.

But of course, Jesus turned what he saw and experienced into a teaching story. In the words of the "Message" translation: "The plain truth is that this widow has given by far the largest offering today. All these others made offerings that they'll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford - she gave her all!" – And that gives us pause as we do our tallies, even as we celebrate Stewardship Sunday. We received a little over 90 pledges for this coming year, every single one much appreciated, every single one received with gratitude. But if you asked me, "Who made the biggest pledge?" I couldn't answer. First, because I really don't know how much people pledge and I don't seek that kind of information. Secondly, even if I knew, I would never know what your pledge means in your life circumstances. Is it a tip or a sacrifice? Or more likely, something in between? We can't tell from the bare numbers, and we don't need to. It's between you and God. But if you made a small pledge despite modest income, I want you to know that it's appreciated beyond the number.

In the kingdom of God, the kingdom that Jesus preached, it is always much more than numbers anyway. It's about people coming together and believing in the possibility of a

God-inspired community, with values that embrace every human being. Money is but a means to live out our values and be a serving church, a giving church, a sacrificing church, a loving church, a place where we grow not just by numbers but in faith and character and commitment to the kingdom of God among us. Sometimes people on the fringes of society remind us of those values in surprising ways. It happens. Just open your eyes and see it. It's what Jesus teaches us. Today, on Stewardship Celebration Sunday of all days. Amen.