

A Legacy of Generosity

**Psalm 146 and Mark 12:38-44 | Twenty Fifth Sunday After Pentecost |
November 10, 2024 | Pastor John Klawiter , preaching**

Grace and peace to you my siblings in Christ,

There's a fable used in business that helps give us some perspective today.

5 monkeys were placed in a cage as part of an experiment. In the middle of the cage was a ladder with bananas on the top rung. Every time a monkey tried to climb the ladder, the experimenter sprayed all of the monkeys with icy water. When a monkey started to climb the ladder, the other ones pulled him down and roughed him up. Soon, no monkey dared go up the ladder.

The experimenter then substituted one of the monkeys in the cage with a new monkey. The first thing the new monkey did was try to climb the ladder to reach the bananas. After getting pulled down and given the business, the new monkey learned: don't climb the ladder. But he didn't know why.

One by one, each of the monkeys in the cage was substituted for a new monkey until none of the original group remained. Every time a new monkey went up the ladder, the rest of the group pulled him off, even those who had never been sprayed with the icy water.

By the end of the experiment, the 5 monkeys in the cage had learned to follow the rule (don't go for the bananas), without any of them knowing the reason why.

If monkeys could talk, I'm sure they'd say : "I don't know, that's just how it's always been done."

This story captures a pervasive theme in many organizational cultures: We tend to do things the way we're told they've always been done without questioning or revisiting the reason behind it, even long after that reason ceases to exist.

The bananas are RIGHT THERE (point at ladder).

It's this type of organizational structure that is at play in our story from Mark this morning. People get called out by Jesus for doing things the way they were taught to do it, even if the reason why they do it is wrong.

Sermon Transcript

Whenever we read the upcoming scripture at the Old Guys or Women of Wisdom groups, I always ask what catches their attention—maybe something that they don't remember reading if it's a passage they know.

This week, the phrase “**devour widows' houses**” (**SLIDE**) was definitely noticed.

It's interesting how much differently we might hear this story when Jesus calling out the scribes is included with the woman giving her two coins.

They are VERY much connected, aren't they?

It doesn't surprise me that Jesus scolds the scribes—those who are educated and are considered wise. The scribes walk around acting like they own the place—they want to be noticed and be honored.

Instead of getting praised, Jesus says that the scribes pray for the widows while devouring, essentially, the only assets they have left.

What's that all about?

According to theologian Ched Myers,

Scribal wealth is a product of "devouring the estates of widows under the pretext of saying long prayers". Mark might be alluding to the practice of scribal trusteeship of the estates of widows (who as women could not be entrusted to manage their deceased husbands' affairs!). Through their public reputation for piety and trustworthiness, scribes had the legal right to administrate estates. As compensation, the scribes got a percentage of the assets; the practice was notorious for embezzlement and abuse. The Torah says to "protect orphans and widows," yet in the name of piety these socially vulnerable classes are being exploited while the scribal class made money off of them.

Like the monkeys in the science experiment, this is a learned behavior—they would be trained how to take the extra assets because that's just the way it's always been done.

Jesus telling them how inappropriate they're behaving is incentive enough to pull him off the ladder and rough him up a bit. In fact, we're at the part of the story where this event is only days before the Passover. Naming the corruption is enough for them to plan to arrest and kill him.

And then... the widow shows up in the story. It's no longer a hypothetical scenario. It gets real.

Sermon Transcript

From my friend, retired Pastor Brian Stoffregen, she does something incredible.

Lepta (**SLIDE of coins**) is the name of the coins that the poor widow put in the treasury. According to different dictionaries, it would take 4 to 8 of them to make one cent. It was the smallest coin available. The money she put in was trivial -- unimportant, insignificant -- at least to the church. What could two *lepta* buy? It would take about eight “lepta” just to buy one sparrow.

It is significant that she had two *lepta*. She could have put one in the treasury and kept the other for herself -- thus giving 50% to the church. It is a mistake stewardship concept that 10% of our income belongs to God. 100% of our income belongs to God and God has given it to us to manage as best we can. That's what stewardship means -- managing what belongs to another.

I love that.

We are stewards. Our eyes must be open to where God is guiding us.

This hits close to home this week following a very contentious election cycle and strong reactions in our country and around the world. In our community.

The results of elections matter to how money is allocated and what people are most affected.

The simple truth is, resources will be distributed differently.

Why does this matter to us?

The church stewards what we have. We're not in the money-making business like the scribes—money is used to fulfill our mission. God's mission. Our generosity makes a difference to the hungry, the homeless, the young and the old, the oppressed—the ignored—the lonely.

No matter who we voted for, we cannot be complacent and wait for someone else to take care of our neighbor.

We just do it. It comes to mind someone who did just that.

Last week was All Saints Sunday, but I want to share the story of one of our members who died in 2022.

Sermon Transcript

Mary Mehus (**SLIDE**) joined our congregation after retiring from a career in Wisconsin working for John Deere. Mary did not have any children. She was an adventurer—she loved her family and, no matter where she lived, she was connected to her church.

She was a blessing to our congregation, yet she was humble and quiet—she did much behind the scenes, like working with the Hugo Family Shelter, befriending other members who were in need of conversation and guidance.

At her funeral, her brother Roger shared that Mary was fortunate in that happiness came easily for her. She knew what to look for and knew how to find it. It was simple for her. Early on in her life, she found that when she made other people happy, it made her happy.

Mary had a simple and strong faith. She had a generous heart.

Over two years after her death, a letter came in the mail last month. It was from Roger.

Mary's request was to share her abundance with the churches that made a difference in her life. No strings attached, but here was a check... for over \$60,000.

That's a LOT of bananas (**slide**).

Now what?

We are stewards of what God has given us. Mary's gift will not be absorbed into our budget and we won't just hide it under a bushel. And yes, it's certainly more than 2 lepta's—but, like the widow in the story, Mary's gift is as a model of discipleship. It's inspirational.

Mary cared about our community.

When council meets, we'll talk about how Faith makes a difference and how to best honor her gift.

The community needs might be changing. We aren't called to keep doing the same things we've always done, but we are called to listen. Talk to our neighbors. Fill the gaps where we are needed.

What do you hear? Who is vulnerable, where might Faith step up in powerful, transformational ways?

Sermon Transcript

Share. Talk about it. Bring forth creative ideas.

Each of us might be called to advocate for someone in ways we didn't anticipate—ways that push us to look up that ladder and say, I'm willing to go for it. **(CLIMB)** I'm getting those bananas.

Thank God you're here today. We have important work ahead of us. Godly work, holy work. Amen.