

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Get Ready for a Surprise”
Thomas G. Speers, III
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Lesson: Mark 12:38-44

In the Bible there are many stories about God’s ability to choose surprising people for God’s service. Last week we read about Ruth, a gentile woman from Moab, which was not the best place to be from. Yet, Ruth becomes the mother of Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David the king. In a world where women had no standing, Ruth provides us an example of faithful living, and of God’s surprising and loving ways. Don’t overlook people on the edge of society.

In the New Testament we have the story of another woman, another widow. The story begins with Jesus attacking the scribes who liked to make a big show of themselves. They wanted everyone to know just how important and religious they were. Over and against this crowd, Jesus lifts up an otherwise obscure woman, who puts a mere penny in the collection plate—our counters don’t much care for small change in our collection plates, especially pennies—but this woman is praised because unlike those who gave lots of money, she gave pretty much all she had. Most everyone else would have praised the top givers, those who gave the large donations. But once again, God in Jesus chooses to recognize the most surprising of people, a person on the edge of society. This poor really invisible woman is raised up by Jesus to be an example for all time. God chooses the most surprising people.

Now it is nice to have stories like this in the season when churches are asking for money. It offers a great example of Christian generosity. Yet using it in this season runs the risk of misunderstanding this story. For some it is an excuse: my small offering is important, and I don’t need to try to give more because after all Jesus praised a woman who only gave a penny. For others, the more generous folks in church, who give large amounts that keep the church going, preachers don’t often challenge them with the prophetic words behind this story. Yet this story is about a woman who gave *everything* she had in God’s service, so those of us who give lots of money away, we can’t compare ourselves to this woman, because we don’t give everything away. And those who give small amounts, again, if you aren’t giving everything away, then don’t use this woman as an example for you either.

Bill Phillippe tells a story which could be used in relation to the poor widow—a story some of you have heard before—of the church meeting, where “a very wealthy man rose to tell the rest of those present about his Christian faith. ‘I am a millionaire,’ he said, ‘and I attribute it all to the rich blessings of God in my life. I remember that turning point in my faith. I had just earned my first dollar and I went to a church meeting that night. The speaker was a missionary who told about his work. I know that I only had that dollar bill in my pocket and had to either give it all to God’s work or nothing at all. So at that moment I decided to give my whole dollar--everything I had--[just like the widow] to God. I believe that God blessed that decision, and that is why I am a rich man today.’

“He finished and there was an awed silence at his testimony as he moved toward his seat. As he sat down, a little old lady sitting in the same pew leaned over to him and said, ‘I dare you to do it again.’”¹ In his younger days, the man was like the widow. He gave his all.

In a way this story encourages a form of percentage giving. It isn’t so much the actual dollar amount that someone gives. More important than that is whether you are giving sacrificially. In every church I have known, we all can strive to give more generously. We all can give in a way that is more reflective of all that God has given to us. The example of the widow calls us to move beyond grudge giving to thanks giving.

¹ William R. Phillippe, *A Stewardship Scrapbook*. Geneva Press. © 1999

These passages today also have a word for us in the life of Green Hill Church. In another week we will elect a Pastor Nominating Committee and after that we will be electing new officers. Your faithfulness and loyalty and commitment may be exactly what God needs right now to open a whole new future for this place. Just because you haven't been a leader before doesn't mean God can't use you now. God has a long history of choosing the most surprising people. It might also be your calling to stand with people on the edge, both inside and outside this congregation, who may be exactly the people you need right now to prepare you for the future God intends for this church. Who are the people that nobody else has noticed, who are the people who usually get overlooked? Who are the people who might even be from the wrong side of the tracks? They could be the ones to move you forward to a future beyond your wildest dreams. Are your eyes open to recognize them?

In a society that tends to disregard those on the edge, foreigners, women, the poor, people with questionable reputations, and raises up the religious, the rich, those who like to make a big show of themselves, God chooses the most surprising and unexpected people: a woman from the wrong side of the tracks and another woman from the wrong side of the economic scale. If God uses them, then maybe God can use the likes of you. Be ready for a surprise!

Let us pray: Most gracious God, we give thanks for your grace that continues to reach out to the most surprising people--people we'd never expect or choose: the poor, the forgotten, the outsiders, the not so clean, using them as an example of what faithfulness looks like. Challenge us to be so loving, loyal and generous in our own lives, following Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.