

## ***Two Pennies***

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
October 30, 2016  
Texts: Mark 12:41-44

So, here's my question for this morning. Well, at least one of them. How many of you will stop to pick up a penny if you see it lying on the street or the sidewalk or the parking lot? (pause). I do, and I admit I do seem to find a lot of them and that's always surprised me. If I can see them lying there, especially on a busy sidewalk or in a parking lot, why don't others? Or is it that they see them and just don't bother to pick them up? Even nickels or dimes lying there, some folks will just walk right past them. Quarters, half dollars – that's a different story. Someone is much more likely to make the effort to pick them up. Regular paper money? People are all over that. But pennies, not so much. Why is that do you think? (pause)

Of course, some pennies do have value – a lot of value. Peter and his dad collected coins together when he was a boy and we still have that collection, stuffed inside a battered cardboard box buried in the back of a closet. Peter still adds to it, carefully sorting through his change about once a week or so. Occasionally he finds a “good one.” A good penny is one which has the oak leaf on the reverse side, is stamped with either an “S” or a “P,” and has a date on it of 1955 or earlier. Talk to him at coffee hour if you

want to know why these are his parameters but for our purposes here this morning suffice to say that not all pennies are equal in value despite saying “1 cent” on them!

What might surprise you is to realize that the monetary concept of a penny – the smallest unit of currency in a monetary system – is a universal one. These smallest currency units may not be called pennies specifically but the idea that a coin exists for the purpose of holding the bottom place in a currency system only makes sense. I mean, something has to be at the bottom of the system just like something has to be at the top. For example, what do you think the largest unit of currency still in circulation is in the United States today? (pause) The \$10,000 bill! Production of these notes along with smaller ones like the \$1000 bill and the \$500 bill stopped in 1969 but the bills are still legal tender and still in circulation. When one surfaces in the banking system, they are honored but then sent in to the Federal Reserve to be destroyed. The one cent piece or penny as we call it is still the most common piece of currency in circulation. Here’s a fun fact about pennies I bet you didn’t know. Each penny turns a profit for the federal government and that profit is used to pay down the federal deficit! How is that possible? Well, it cost 8/10ths of a cent to make each penny but it is still honored at the full value of one cent. The 20% profit on each penny produced is retained by the federal government. According to the US Department of the

Treasury website, this profit in the year 2000 was almost \$24 million! Holy cow, right??

Funny, how there can be hidden value in something as simple, as iconic as a penny. We think we know what it is, what it means, how it is valued and still there is more to it than we realize. Once again, the story we see on the surface is still only part of the entire story. The true meaning, the true richness of the story is often buried deep inside the familiar which we seldom stop to consider or ponder. Such is the case with today's biblical story often known as "the widow's mite." Found in both the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Mark, this story examines in a very few sentences what it means to give to God. On the surface it is a very simple little story in which Jesus witnesses a poor woman putting a tiny sum, the equivalent of two pennies, into the Temple treasury and points out what he is seeing to the disciples. He contrasts her gift with those of the rich people also visible, celebrating her gift as more abundant than the larger amounts given by the wealthy because she gives all she has.

Okay. Simple enough, we think. Jesus is telling the disciples to give without counting the cost. That seems pretty obvious. But is that all there is to this story? Is that the only thing Jesus was trying to teach to the disciples, and to us by extension, in that moment? No, not hardly. But to understand the full depth of Jesus' point, we need to understand a little about the broader

context of this story. We need to look at a few details, some of which are in the story and some which aren't. The first detail it's helpful to know is that the term "treasury" actually refers to containers scattered around the part of the Temple where they were sitting when they saw the woman. These containers were called "trumpets" because they looked like upside down trumpets, a design intended to prevent theft. These coins were dropped into the treasury not as an offering in themselves but in order to purchase something needed to make an offering in the Temple through the intercession of the priests. You would purchase something like wine, or oil, or even grain which the priests would then present as a sacrificial offering to God on your behalf, along with whatever intention you were asking for. So, when we read that this woman only had two pennies to drop in the treasury, it's clear that would not have bought much in the way of a sacrificial offering – perhaps a few stalks of grain or a thimbleful of the least expensive oil or wine.

We also need to realize that Jesus also observes the other people dropping coins into the various treasuries scattered about. He could see that the wealthier people were much more matter-of-fact about what they were doing. They were there to arrange for sacrifice on their behalf in the Temple. They knew how much they could afford to spend comfortably, and that's what they spent. The woman, on the other hand, gave all she had. Jesus

understood this. How did he know? Perhaps by the way she hesitated for just a second before she dropped them down the chute. Perhaps by the tears silently rolling down her cheeks as she wondered if even this gift of all she had would be enough for whatever situation she had come to pray for. Perhaps by the way her drawn face and spindly arms revealed that regular meals were not her reality. By whatever means, Jesus knew the great extravagance, the abundant generosity her gift to God revealed and he wanted to make sure the disciples understood just how great a gift she was making.

Another important reference point which makes the real meaning of this text clearer actually appears in verses 38-40, immediately preceding this brief story. Here Jesus describes in more detail the scribes of the Temple for whom he has great disdain. They walk around in fine clothes, he says. They expect respect and they expect the best seats in the synagogue and at banquets, just because of who they are and what they have. Then he says something curious, especially in light of the story of the widow and her two pennies. Scribes “devour widows’ houses” Jesus says. Devour widows’ houses? What does that mean? Well, that’s what he’s explaining in the story about the widow’s two pennies. The widow gives all she has – all she has to live on – back to God. So, Jesus is saying that maybe, just maybe, this widow’s gift to the Temple is so extravagant, she won’t be able to

afford to live as she had been. She will become homeless. And this is NOT a good thing, Jesus is saying. This shouldn't be happening, he is saying. The cost of Temple sacrifices to accompany the prayers of poor people should not cost them everything they have! The Temple rules and regulations should not be making poor people even poorer while those who are well off experience more benefit at the Temple just because they have more money to spend.

Simply put, Jesus is saying that the widow's two pennies are more valuable than whatever large monetary sum the scribes put into the Temple treasury because she gives deeply from her poverty. She gives all she has. She gives abundantly from her heart putting her very life on the line. In contrast, the scribes and the Pharisees, the wealthy and the comfortable give what is comfortable to give. They give scarcely when they are capable of giving abundantly. And the woman, who should probably be more cautious to give what she can afford, gives all she has. She gives abundantly from her poverty. The two pennies are still just two pennies, but they represent an incredible gift of abundance which counts far more with God than the larger amounts given cautiously.

That's what makes this nameless woman Jesus never even spoke too one of God's heroes. She got what Jesus was saying, and she might never even have heard him speak. She understood

in the deepest part of her being the three truths about what it means to give to support God's temple, God's church, God's community of the faithful. The first truth is that real giving must be sacrificial in some way. It must cost you something in the way you live your life each day. The second truth about giving is that the size of the gift doesn't matter. That may seem to contradict the first truth because if the size of the gift doesn't matter why should it be a gift that's uncomfortable to give? That's because the size of the gift means less to God than the cost to you for giving it. Put another way, the sacrifice you have to make in order to give the gift is what God notices rather than the amount.

This brings us to the third truth of giving and it's a doozy. If we are able to give from a place of radical generosity without worrying about the cost, God will do something amazing with that gift. God will use that gift especially, that gift which is filled with so much love that the person sets aside worry and fear in order to make it – that's exactly the gift God will use to do something so incredibly amazing that it's beyond our ability to imagine what it might be. I know, I know. This sounds crazy. This sounds like a guilt trip as we talk about giving the Sunday before Stewardship Sunday next week. Give till it hurts and God will do something so wonderful we won't be able to imagine what it will be. Really? That sounds – that sounds – well, impossible.

Yes, exactly. God asks us to step out and do the impossible all the time and God always has. God is all about the impossible and God needs us to be willing to be about the impossible too. Does that mean I expect you in the week ahead to make a pledge that is financially unsound for you? No, of course not. Remember Jesus' anger at the Scribes for putting the poor widows in that position? No. What I am asking is that each of you consider carefully and prayerfully the amount you will give to the support of this church and all her ministries not being afraid to stretch even a little tiny bit beyond what feels comfortable. I'm not asking you to give all you have. I'm not asking you to give until it really hurts. I am asking you to give until you feel it because that's the point where the gift not only gives to church, it gives something back to you too. It strengthens your trusting muscles that you can find a way to do this. It strengthens your loving muscles by enabling your church to spread God's love a little more broadly through your loving gift. It strengthens you because it makes real in you the simple faith that God is in charge of all things, even down to lost pennies on the sidewalk. Two pennies can do amazing things in God's hands if we are willing to put them in God's hands through our gifts to this church. Giving from an attitude of scarcity or abundance, that's the choice before us all. Never an easy one for sure. But a choice all the same. Amen.