

“Tremendous Things”

A sermon preached from the pulpit of
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
Mark 12:38-44

November 7th, 2021
Matt Matthews

In our text today, we find Jesus and his disciples downtown watching the comings and goings of busy people. The vendors in the marketplace are fawning over the self-important scribes who walk around in their high-dollar clothes. At the temple, people are making donations at the treasury. Big wigs are stroking big checks. These people pray long prayers in public places and push people out of line so they get the best seats at the diners. Don't be like these self-absorbed people, Jesus tells his disciples.

It's hot. The afternoon is slow. Jesus and his disciples are a little drowsy sitting on a low stone wall in the shade.

“Do you see that woman,” Jesus asks, discreetly pointing.

The disciples nod, but they don't know what they're looking at. An old woman. Walking up to the temple poor box. A little shaky. Steadied by a cane.

“She's still dressed in funeral clothes,” Jesus says. “Look at what's in her hand. Watch her.”

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Change scenes with me to the modern day. It's 7:35 in the morning at a local Hardees on the highway. It's sunny outside and brisk. The coat you chose this morning is inadequate; you are in denial that winter is bearing down. The restaurant, though, is warm. As you step into the short line, you catch a glimpse of the people. They sit in clusters.

At a table in one corner sits a boy and his mom, Mary. They're both young. She's 23. He's four. He's cuddled up to her, the crumbs of his sausage-cheese biscuit covering both of their laps. His name is Jeb. They're smiling, chatting, eating. She's admiring her son.

Mary's dad went ballistic when she announced that she was pregnant. It was her freshman year of college. He had big hopes for his only daughter. But he wasn't going to waste his money on somebody who obviously wasn't interested in bettering herself. So, he cut her off. He said to her, “You are dead to me.” He actually *said* those words to her. And worse than saying it, he never took it back.

It was he who died, however, not Mary. Something inside that bitter man died. His anger ate and ate and ate until he was hollow, and all he could ever hear was the echo of his own, self-righteous voice.

William Sloan Coffin said, “The world is too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.” Mary understood that in her bones, which is why she so enjoyed every moment with her young son. She didn't have her parents' support, but she had a job, and she had Jeb, and she had a hot plate of Hardee's biscuits and gravy and eggs and bacon and juice and a lap full of Jeb's crumbs, and things were working out.

By the grace of God, she and that boy were doing fine.

At the table in another corner two old men sit facing one another, leaning in close as if around a fire to keep warm. Aged hands gnarled with years of hard work nurse second cups of coffee. These old friends met in Mrs. Wilson's third grade classroom 67-years ago. Since they retired, these two pals meet at Hardees every morning and talk sports and politics and the good old days. Sometimes they laugh wondering how *they* ever got to be such old farts. They never thought *that* would happen to them—but here they are. They marvel at how fast life has become, and how glad they are they don't have to rush around anymore trying to keep up.

There's the guy at the table by the window. He's in a suit. He's got nice shoes, a sharp tie. He's got some baby-face left, maybe five years out of college. His laptop is open on the table. He's talking on his cell phone to his wife. He couldn't come home last weekend because of this training he's worked hard to sew up. Having spent the last five long nights in the micro hotel, he's smiling as he talks with her, absently drawing circles on the table with his finger. They've been married nine months and the new car smell hasn't yet worn off their marriage. "It is not a lack of love," said Nietzsche, "but a lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages."

He misses his friend, his wife, this bright woman on the other end of the line.

And she misses him.

Absence, in this case, really does make the heart grow fonder.

The staff behind the counter are mainly very young adults. They've sped through the first breakfast rush, and now, in the lull before the second-comers, they're talking trash with one another, laughing easily. A woman politely takes the drive-through orders. A man in the back folds food into wrappers and bags it with efficient care. An older woman, the shift boss, watches them move like speed skaters. She has whipped them into a team, but she never cuts them any slack, and she seldom lets them know how bursting with pride she feels. But they know.

And they love her, too.

Outside, the sun shines like an invocation. Traffic is stacking up. The sky is clear. The wind is kicking up. The temperature is supposed to plummet, but it's warm inside. Outside there is chaos and tension, worried people tapping their steering wheel at the red light, fretting over the news on the radio, hurling down the road, living uncertain, worried lives.

But inside, people are enjoying one another. They've stepped out of the rush for a moment. They're paying attention to sacred things—to kinship and friendship, to meaningful work. They are taking good care of the time entrusted them.

Which is exactly what Jesus points out to his disciples about that old widow. She's spending her life in a way that matters. Her gifts will help her community. She is tending the tie that binds. She is investing in the welfare of others. Just two, copper coins.

"Be like that," Jesus tells his disciples. "Be like her. Spend your life like it matters, *because it does. It really does. Don't waste a second of this life that God has entrusted to your care.*"

It's not impossible that Jesus reminded his disciple about Ruth and Naomi. Ruth was going to stand by Naomi's side no matter what. Friendship is important. Community matters. God wants us to stand together with love—steady, strong, tenacious, joyful love. Ruth, like that old widow, is willing to sacrifice for what matters. In this way, it's our job to put the "Ruth" back into what often appears to be a "Ruth-less" world.

Remember this scene in E. B. White's book *Charlotte's Web*? Charlotte has saved Wilbur's life. "Why did you do all this for me?" Wilbur asked. "I don't deserve it. I've never done anything for you."

“You have been my friend,” replied Charlotte. “That in itself is a tremendous thing.”

The widow put in two copper coins.

Jesus smiled that generous smile of his.

“See,” he said. “She has done a tremendous thing.”

Let us do tremendous things—large and small—for one another and for this world that God so loves, in Jesus’ name.

AMEN.

^[1] Mary’s mom didn’t intervene on her behalf. Mary’s mom wasn’t one to question her husband. He was so opinionated. He always thought he was right. He’d get so mad so often. Mary’s mom didn’t say a word.