

*Risk/Reward!*

Shepherd's Grace Church

November 11, 2012

**Mark 12:38-44**

<sup>38</sup>As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,<sup>39</sup> and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!<sup>40</sup> They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

<sup>41</sup>He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. <sup>42</sup>A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. <sup>43</sup>Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. <sup>44</sup>For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." (also read Ruth 3: 1-5, 4: 13-17)

Context: Today is Veteran's Day. In the early part of worship, we have recognized our veterans and celebrated not only their service but also the service of all brave men and women who fight to defend the freedom and liberty we so deeply treasure! Today is also a day of reminder of our service. Our freedoms do not come from the place we are born, but rather from the Grace of God. All of us are called to his service! All of us are called to support his ministry! At the beginning of the sermon, Tamara Bucher, Shepherd's Grace Elder brought a financial snapshot of our giving at Shepherd's Grace for the past year. Her graphics are not available for this message but we will try to have them added to the website in the near future. A summary however demonstrates that there were three months that we achieved our tithing goal in 2011/2012. Several months we were close, many months we were far short. The context then for what follows lies in service and stewardship.

This is the second week we have studied from the Book of Ruth. This is also the day we honor our veterans, and it is a day we are called to service! How do all these things tie together? I believe they are all accomplished with an element of risk that yields a potential reward. All three recognize just how fragile and how fortunate is the Kingdom of God! Think about it. The liberties we celebrate as we remember our veterans are not guaranteed by these veterans. Veterans do not give us life or the pursuit of happiness. God alone gives these things, but without brave men and women from every generation willing to give their lives for what we hold so dear, these liberties would be taken by torturous despots who through greed and the pursuit of power would desire our riches for themselves. Without their risk, we could not know the reward of freedom we so greatly enjoy!

As we think about the situation we heard presented to us by Tamara, we are momentarily sobered. There were only three months in the past year that we met our tithing goal for the ministry of Shepherd's Grace. It doesn't take a mathematical genius to figure out that we must have had a shortfall in the treasury, yet if we look at the financial reports provided by the elders each month we would see that the financial situation in our church is good! The Kingdom of God is a fragile construction. How can giving be less than what we need and yet our need be met? In this case, the answer is easy! We have had other events to generate revenue we need for the ministry of our church. We have had many fundraisers and we have had some very generous memorials this past year. That is the worldly answer! The Kingdom answer however is much more complex. It is a matter of risk and reward. Not our risk! Not our reward, but God's!

When Ruth traveled to Bethlehem with Naomi, she traveled not because she knew what she would receive at the end of the journey. Quite to the contrary, she traveled with an absolute uncertainty! She had nothing in Moab. Her husband was dead. Her life was to be that of a widow living in a famine stricken land, but at least it was her land. In Israel, she faced the same prospects; no home, no food, no provider or protector, yet she chose to go! Last week we learned that she chose to go because love is more than a feeling. It is a commitment, a covenant. Ruth chooses to honor this commitment. She says, "wherever you go, I will go and there will I lie down. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God! May the Lord do thus and so to me and still more if even the power of death parts me from you!" Love, for Ruth is not a feeling! It is a commitment! It is sacred and it is to be pursued! Ruth was willing to risk her very life for the reward of honoring the love she had for Naomi and for her son! This week we learn that Naomi is willing to take the same risk for Ruth!

Do we know or can we even imagine that kind of love? I believe we see it witnessed every day here at Shepherd's Grace! Our ministry, our life together is full of stories of our commitment to love! When we feed the hungry, we often do it with very little money. Some in the ministry take from their own pockets to pay for food when there is a shortfall in the offerings! We watch and marvel at the relationship our youth sponsors have with the young men and women attending youth group. They get caught up in these young people's struggles and are reminded continually of how difficult it is to grow up in this world. When issues come up, they don't send the kids home to talk to their parents, but they commit their lives, their experiences, their time and energy to helping! They risk much, as do the young people they serve.

What then is the Kingdom answer to how we manage to continue ministry in the face of shortfall? The answer is love! God's love provides for us all we need at exactly the time we need it! God risks everything so that our needs might be met! In John 10: 10 Jesus says, "I came so that you might have life, and have it abundantly!" God's risk is in sending his son, his only son to a world who looks only at material things and lusts after them above all else, believing that His gift of love can overcome our shortsighted desire for immediate comfort! God's risk is seen in the service of our veterans, in the

service of Ruth, in the service of our congregation! God's risk has the potential to reap great reward! The question is: "Will it?" To answer that question, we must ask ourselves what kind of congregation we intend to be!

That is exactly where Ruth, and the veterans we honor, and our commitment to God's ministry at Shepherd's Grace collide with the Gospel of Mark this morning! In Mark's Gospel, Jesus teaches us that we should beware of scribes who like to wear long robes and receive recognition in the market and in the church and at parties. He says they devour widow's houses! What he is saying to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that the church has the potential to be on the lookout for only the church. We as a congregation must always be on the lookout for the work we are doing. Is the work God's work or is it our work? What kind of congregation do we want to be?

We all have heard stories of pastors who find themselves at cross purposes with the congregation because of misuse of money. The pastor will become involved with worldly pursuits and will live beyond his or her means and will have access to church money. That temptation is great and we must always protect our pastors by limiting their access. I do think it is a good thing that we treat our pastors with respect. We work hard and it is important to know we are lifted up in prayers, but we are not entitled because of the training we have or the knowledge we bring. We are God's servants and our message is that all of us together are God's servants! What kind of congregation do we want to be?

Jesus says in today's lesson that these derelict pastors will devour widow's houses? What does he mean by that? To understand, we must look carefully at the second part of Mark's message for today. In this section we encounter people giving at the treasury. The treasury is an important part of the temple in Jesus' day. It is located above the floor of the sanctuary and is positioned in such a way as to allow the priests to see who is making an offering. Offerings of cash are exchanged for temple coins and it is possible for the priest to know how much a person is giving by the sound of the money as it falls into the treasury.

Our passage says Jesus is watching as people give. I wonder if we ever realize as we make our offering that Jesus is watching. I do not believe he is keeping score week to week, but I believe he is examining our heart as we make our offering! He wants to know the level of our commitment to God's ministry, the level of love we are willing to express. This is not measured in dollars and cents, but by the attitude and action of our heart! Jesus is watching as people give!

Some of the rich give large amounts of money. They drop their coins in and the sound attracts the attention of the priest! These large amounts could be used to help the poor and to assist the needy, but all too frequently they are used to build bigger buildings and to buy better religious artifacts. The first century is not much different from the twenty first! We must beware! God's money is God's money! What kind of congregation do we want to be?

Those who give large amounts go mostly unnoticed by Jesus. Then an elderly widow approaches. She puts in two copper coins worth about a penny! This action gets Jesus attention! He quickly calls the disciples to him. This is a common teaching tactic Jesus uses. He uses it with us also! He calls them to him and asks a question. Do you see that person? His point here is that the person would have gone largely unnoticed in a society which measures worth by the sound of coins dropping in the treasury!

Did you see that person? She gave more than all these others! Can you imagine the look on the faces of the disciples? They believed as did most in Jesus day that wealth was a sign of blessing from God! The wealthy were worthy of notice! They were thought to be the Holy! In this moment, Jesus stands that notion on its head. He ignores the wealthy and pays attention to the poor! Did you see that person?

Those others gave from their abundance. She gave from her need! She gave what she was going to live on this week! Now she has no money for food or other necessities. She is widowed and has no one to take care of her! She gave everything! In that instant when her copper coins were dropped in the treasury, there was a sound of trust that rang true with Jesus! He saw her giving and knew her heart! She gave from all she had to live on and now she had only God to live on! Give us this day, our daily bread! She was willing to trust God for all she needed and Jesus was watching! What are we watching? What kind of congregation do we want to be?

In our congregation do we notice those who are in need? We ask. As a pastor, I ask. I ask everyone to give what they are able to give for the purpose of God's ministry, however do we really notice? Those who give from their need, need to be noticed! This woman came and she gave and all she really wanted was to be noticed. She did not want to be praised for her giving, she wanted to be heard in her needing! She wanted to be noticed and acknowledged as a person. She wanted her voice to be heard as she lifted her prayers to God and she wanted others to join her prayer! Do we see these people in our congregation?

What kind of congregation do we want to be? Every week, we open our doors to those who are hungry. Not all who enter are hungry for food, some want fellowship, some want warmth in winter or cool in summer. Some just want a place where they can be heard! We open our doors and we feed them in so many ways. Last week a lady gave one of our volunteers a letter asking for help to be moved. We were able to respond to that letter. Some have asked for prayers, some have asked for help, some have just asked to have someone talk to them. We have listened and in many cases we have responded. I want to be part of that congregation.

Last Friday, one who came to the meal ministry needed some assistance. I sent a person to wal-mart to get what the person needed. I put that person at risk. I did not know how the individual in need would react when we gave them what they needed. There was a risk in service. The member of our congregation responded, went to Wal-mart and on the way back came across a person in need of a

meal. The person was already doing one good thing, but stopped to help another person whom he recognized as also in need. I want to be part of a congregation that notices those in need and reaches out to them with whatever resources are available! What kind of congregation do we want to be?

All the woman at the treasury wanted was to be noticed in her need! She was a member! She was one of them, and except for Jesus, no one noticed! I believe we at Shepherd's Grace are called to notice. We are called to notice not just the ones who come and ask for help, but we are called to notice those who are next to us. We are called to listen carefully to the needs of our friends and family and we are called to love them. Like Ruth, we are called to commit to that love. Love is not just a feeling, it is a commitment and it is that commitment we are called to as a congregation!

We will continue to ask for your tithes. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we are called to be good stewards of God's ministry. We will continue to encourage you to know that you can give with the expectation that your gift will be used to God's glory and not to the glory of the church! We will continue to teach about tithing. God has specific expectations of this service! But let us also strive to notice! Let us see those who are hurting in our midst and let us reach out to them and not devour them! Let us embrace them and let us rejoice with them. Let us love them!

This type of ministry is a risk! We may continue for awhile to struggle with the overall giving in the offering plate. It is also a reward as we watch while people share not just their financial treasure, but their imagination, their energy and their prayers. Through these efforts, God will continue to use Shepherd's Grace! In His service, we will receive a reward even greater than we could ever imagine!

God loves the world so much that he gives even his only Son! They call him Jesus! He watches as we give and he knows our heart! There is great risk in love. There is greater reward!

Amen!

**Next Week: Scripture: Mark 13: 1-8. Message: Larger Than Life! As we explore one of the last lessons in Mark's gospel, we come to a question that is frequently asked. Is this the end time? The answer is the title to our message. It is larger than life! What does the Lord want us to know about the end time? How are we to live? How are we to prepare? The answers may surprise you. Come and Worship! Come and See!**