

Our scripture passage today follows last week's passage in the book of Mark, which talked about the greatest commandment: to love God and others. When reading and studying the Bible, the placement of the stories gives an idea of the intended teaching of the story. Stories and lessons aren't just stuck in randomly. If so, we may be tempted to pull them out of context randomly and apply any meaning to them.

For example, if we pull out this passage, we lose the richness that Jesus was trying to teach. This passage has two parts: the first part warns against religious scholars who don't practice what they preach, and the second part talks about a widow who offers her two cents. If we isolate these two parts of the lesson and don't read it within the fuller context, then we might think this is a simple passage about flawed clergy and generous widows.

When we look at the placement in the chapter of Mark, that follows the greatest commandment to Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your strength, and to love others as yourself, then we see that these are two examples that illustrate this teaching.

In the first part, we see that these particular scribes were not following the greatest commandment. Jesus commented on their long robes. The scribes wore special robes to be more visible to the people. Clergy do the same today. I will wear my collar or some kind of clothing associated with the clergy to identify who I am when I am serving in the community. I may also wear my robe on special holy days when I am fulfilling more of a priestly role. You may have seen other clergy wear their collars or vestments when marching or protesting to show they are clergy who are fighting for social justice. It is also helpful to be identified quickly as clergy in a crisis

situation. But, these particular scribes in this passage were wearing their vestments as a way to get personal recognition.

They were going out to the marketplace, where people gathered, just to get accolades and special treatment. They were putting on a religious display. Their intentions weren't rooted in loving God and others. They were loving themselves.

We are then introduced to the generous widow. She is certainly an example of loving God with her whole being. She was only required to give one of the coins, but she gave both, all that she had to live on, her whole livelihood. She is the epitome of loving the Lord with all her heart, mind, soul, and strength.

To love the Lord with all our heart means to set our hearts on God. Our passions, feelings, and emotions are rooted in God's love. When we are passionate about something, everyone knows it. It's what we talk about. Whatever we love will show up in our lives. When we love the Lord with all our heart, everyone around us sees it through our actions, like the widow giving her last two coins. Everyone perceived the scribes as models who loved God with all their heart. But Jesus saw through their religious showmanship.

To love God with all our soul means to love God with our lives. Our soul is our essence, who we are and whose we are. Loving God with all our soul can be seen by the way we live our lives. We use our time and energy to love and fulfill God's promises. When we waste a lot of energy worrying or doing things for the wrong reasons, then we're wasting time and energy. The widow wasn't worried about where her next meal was coming from, yet the scribes wasted their opportunity with the people because they were focused on themselves.

Loving God with all our mind means thinking Godly thoughts and using our

intelligence for Godly things. Our love for God requires more than an emotional response. Thinking and learning about our faith is an act of love and worship. The scribes were highly educated, but they fell short when they took their eyes off God.

Loving God with all our strength means putting a little muscle into it. I recently moved furniture upstairs. In order to make it up those stairs, I had to use all my strength to accomplish that task. If I used just a little bit of my strength, I wouldn't have made it up the stairs, and there would be lots of dings in walls and broken furniture at the bottom of the stairs. Loving the Lord with our strength is using all we've got and doing whatever it takes. The widow gave her all and did whatever it took to love her Lord.

When we look at this passage within the bigger context, the widow's offering isn't really about money. Though her gift was the smallest in monetary value, it was the greatest in sacrifice. The value of a gift is not determined by its amount, but by the spirit in which it is given. A gift given grudgingly or for recognition, like the scribes, loses its value. Gifts – of our money, time, and our lives -- are pleasing to God when they are given out of gratitude and a spirit of generosity. We love the Lord and others with our whole being because we are grateful for our salvation.

I invite you to look at the Notes section in the bulletin. The four areas – heart, soul, mind, and strength -- are listed. Take a moment to reflect and write down an example of how you concretely love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Circle the area where you need to work on giving your full two cents; perhaps the area that may receive one cent, only what is required, or the area that is experiencing poverty.

Gracious and Giving God, you pour your extravagant grace on us. Every inch of us, you love. Yet, we fall short in loving you with all of our selves. Help us to love you with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Where we lack, show us how to love in real, practical ways. Show us what we have to remove from our lives and our hearts to be able to love. Forgive us when we fail and give up, when we think what we have to offer isn't very much or won't make a difference. You know our hearts and our intentions and that makes our two cents more valuable. Give us courage to give our full two cents, all of ourselves, to you. Amen.