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Sermon Title: The Widow's Might
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Luke 21:1-3

Luke 21:1-3

He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them;

I love today's Bible story, often called "The Widow's Mite." That old-fashioned word, "mite," refers to an ancient coin worth about half a penny. And I've just used that word, *mite*, as a play on words for my sermon title, "The Widow's *Might*." Because the little three-verse story from the Bible teaches a lesson that we all want to believe. It's how we want to live. It's what we want kids growing up to learn. It's at the heart of American spirit.

We all want to believe that every penny counts, that every person has something to offer, that every journey begins with a small step, that a chain is only as strong as the weakest link so the weakest link is important, that Rome wasn't built in a day, that easy does it, that the tortoise is as important as the hare, that waste not want not, that a penny saved is a penny earned, and a hundred other slogans and platitudes our parents taught us or our grandparents or Benjamin Franklin or the Book of Proverbs — all places that teach us the value of a penny, literally and figuratively. Mites can be mighty.

The Bible story is simple. Jesus is in the Temple, "people-watching," observing. He sees people come and go. Some are earnest. Some are distracted. Some are in tears. Some are urgent, or worried or joyful or bored or hopeful or afraid or nervous or needy or happy. It's the same in any church on any Sunday — 300 people in church today, 300 different scenarios, 300 different worries and concerns, joys and triumphs, needs and hopes.

Jesus observes all this and suddenly was struck by the offering. Evidently, in those days, some folks made quite a show of their offering. I met a pastor

once who said in his church he gave special offering envelopes only to the top givers, so when the offering plates went around, everybody knew who the top givers were. I've been in churches that took two separate offerings. One was for the "tithers," the folks who gave 10 percent of their incomes. The other was for everybody else.

What struck Jesus was seeing this one single woman, a woman overcome by life's circumstances, a person left with little, a person humbled by sorrow, yet out of her meagerness, she presented her offering to God. The key to the story is that out of all the people who came in and out of the Temple that day, it was this woman and her "mite," her half penny, that caught Jesus's attention. "Because," Jesus said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. Because, out of her poverty, she put in all she had."

I am preaching this sermon today because today we're launching a little campaign to raise 600,000 pennies. Devenny Widmer is 11 years old, one of our 6th-graders. And since she was 5 years old, she has given me a little bag of coins once or twice a year for our work in India. This year, Devenny has a whole team, seven 11-year-olds, and they are raising "Pennies for People." They want to find enough coins, enough "mites," to fund our entire ministry with the elderly in India. We have two homes for the aged, three feeding centers, all helping very old people who have nothing, no one, just us. To do it, we need 600,000 pennies.

The idea began with a penny. The idea is built on pennies. I know, because look at the jar over there. It already has so many coins that I can't lift it! I can't budge it. If it were filled with checks or dollars, it would be light as a feather! Instead, people are scouring their dressers, looking under couch cushions, emptying their purses, checking the floor of their cars, watching the sidewalks.

This campaign has at least three pluses, and they actually mirror today's Bible story:

1. It affirms the elderly
2. It shows the value of one penny.
3. It emphasizes the importance of every person.

In the Bible story, the hero is an elderly woman, a widow. Poor, neglected, undervalued, not important, a throwaway in that ancient day. And she's the hero of the story. To Jesus, she's not a throwaway person. And her half penny is not a throwaway penny.

Devenny has got me back in the habit of looking for throwaway pennies. I used to look for them all the time. I even preached a sermon about it a few years ago, finding loose change all over Fairfield, most in places where it was clearly thrown away. One good place is the dumpsters outside dormitories at Fairfield U. I'm surprised I haven't been arrested yet. Especially at the end of the semester or the school year, the college students clean out their rooms, toss it all into the dumpster, not too accurately, and the change falls all around like "pennies from heaven." We turn it into "Pennies for People."

I begin every day downtown at the Mobil station on the Post Road. Every day, 365 days a year. And every day I find coins in the 20-30 feet leading into and out of the store. People buy their chips and soda and gas, they get their change, they don't want to be bothered, it gets dropped on the asphalt, thrown away. But with God, there are no throwaway people and no throwaway money. Every penny counts. Every person matters.

I think back to that lone widow walking into the Temple in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, thinking she didn't much matter. Widows had a hard life in those days and still do in many places. People just forget the elderly and the lonely. They're not important, not productive. Maybe they have no family ... or worse, no family that cares. Society and religion and culture and superstition and bad Karma all converge to leave the elderly poor truly destitute. And yet Jesus saw in that widow something grand, something beautiful, something noble, something worth remembering.

Here we are, 2,000 years later, still talking about her. And here, in our little church, she's the inspiration for our little "Pennies for People" campaign. She's the reminder that every penny counts, every person matters.

Did she feel humiliated? Did she even consider not going to Temple because she couldn't give much? But "not much" can be quite a lot. Throughout my entire church life, those who couldn't give much held the key to having enough. When each of us gives the little much we can give or does the little much we can do, God makes that substantial.

Fact is we all have much. It's not the same much. It might be not much, or it might be a lot of much. But whatever much we have, Jesus is saying that much is important. Whatever much you can do, whatever much you can give, however much you can come, that counts, that matters, that's important.

I had a lady once in my church. She couldn't do much. Literally, she couldn't get out of bed. She had some muscle disease that left her, she said, "like a

big bowl of Jell-O.” But she could dial a telephone. In that church we had a lot of shut-ins, over 40, and every day, that lady sat up in her bed, pulled her telephone close to her and called up our shut-ins, just to chat and pray. I had another lady, a widow, nice lady, not famous or anything, but when she died, the church was packed! It turned out that in her later years, when she couldn’t do much, couldn’t give much, she would read the local newspaper. Every day she scoured the newspapers. So-and-so had a car accident, so-and-so had a house fire, so-and-so’s house got broken into, so-and-so graduated from high school, so-and-so scored a soccer goal, so-and-so made the honor roll, so-and-so lost a loved one, so-and-so won a contest ... and she would send them a hand-written note. The widow’s *might*, M-I-G-H-T.

The inspiration for our little “Pennies for People” campaign is two-fold. First, our 11-year-old girls, led by Devenny Widmer, gathering their little pennies and nickels in plastic bags, realizing how much they can do! The other inspiration is the work itself with the elderly. Our work in India, FOCI, has two homes for the aged and feeding centers. One was founded by an elderly widow and is now led by another elderly widow. Both were married at a very young age, 11 or 12 years old. Both widowed very quickly back in a time when to be a widow was the end of any meaningful life, any real joy, any social contact. You were bad luck, you were cursed, you were unwanted, unnecessary, a burden, like useless pennies piling up in your pocket or on your dresser, an annoyance, a clutter.

Both of these girls grew up and found new life in Christ, new meaning, new purpose. Both women devoted the rest of their lives to caring for others, especially the elderly, the forgotten, the unwanted throwaway elderly.

The other Home for the Aged was founded by a Catholic nun who, like Mother Teresa, left the safety and security of the convent to devote her life to the forgotten, unwanted, throwaway elderly. For years she raised half the money, and FOCI gave the other half. Now she’s too old, she’s too frail, and the Home for the Aged can’t go on ... without some pennies.

When Devenny gave me her last plastic bag of pennies, a light went on in my head and hers — let’s get all the folks to give all their pennies and nickels or dollars or whatever they want, let’s watch the sidewalks and reach under the couch cushions and look under our car seats and ask our grandmothers to check their dressers. We know we can find 600,000 pennies for people.

When Devenny agreed to do it — I think it was three Sundays ago — Gracie Carol, Devenny, Mike Widmer, and I met together and decided to do this.

We decided to start today. The next day I told a friend about it and she, the very first person I told, wrote a check for 50,000 pennies. The next week Devenny's grandfather died, and at the funeral, Devenny's great-grandmother gave 5,000 pennies. I told this story at the Watermark, where I teach and preach, and now, every week, Liz Zarrilli's mom fills my pocket with change, 1,700 pennies so far.

And frankly, and I mean this in all seriousness, I think Jesus is standing around watching all this happen and smiling really broadly. Because we get it. The Widow's *Mite*. Or *Might*. We get it.

Let me close with this thought. The "Pennies for People" campaign is about getting pennies to help the elderly poor in India. This sermon is not. This sermon is broader than that: Jesus's simple idea that everyone matters.

On Friday I had a meeting at the parsonage, and when it broke up, we started talking about this new snowstorm that's coming. Immediately, Pam Dies and Mike Howard started lamenting that another big snowstorm on a Monday will close St. George's Soup Kitchen, where we have been feeding the poor every month for 15 years. It was closed because of the snow last month and now, maybe again tomorrow. What will the people we feed do for food, Pam and Mike wondered.

I'm standing there thinking, RATS! Another snowstorm! I hate it! It's cold, it's dangerous, it's icy, it's a pain in the neck (literally, if you've fallen as much as I have this winter), I can't stand any more of this. Whining because my life is disrupted. Yes, I'll suffer greatly. If there is another big storm on Monday, I'll take one of my front-wheel drive vehicles, drive downtown, get a pizza, come home, sit in front of the fire, read a book, listen to cello music. Oh, how I'll suffer. Meanwhile, Pam and Mike are wondering about how all those poor, hungry, unemployed, homeless, lonely "throwaway people will get any food that night.

Again, I imagine Jesus smiling proudly. Some people get it.