

## November 7, 2021 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Mark 12:41–44](#)

TITLE: **Intervals of Faith – Tritone: Resolving Tension**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

The Tritone interval is dissonant, hard to hear, and full of tension. As such, it is the perfect symbol for the season we're living in. Every day we move around in the world and feel tense. Much of it is still tied to Covid—Are infection rates going up or down? Who's unvaccinated? Will my young child be okay? However, the tensions are not just Covid-related. There's political tension—Republican vs. Democrat; progressive vs. moderates. There's work tension—Do I go to the office or do I work remotely? And of course, there's money tension—Do I have enough money? The holidays are coming; the credit card bill and rent are due; and it's Stewardship Sunday at the church. Tensions are everywhere. It's as if the soundtrack of our life is now built around a tritone.

Jesus was no stranger to tension. By the time of today's gospel lesson, they'd already paraded into the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday—embodying the tension between Roman armies and generals arriving on stallions and this humble rabbi who rode into the capitol on a donkey. Now they are seated in an outer court of the glorious temple, people-watching and a bit awe-struck as the scribes and religious officials in expensive robes empty their money pouches into the treasury boxes mounted on a wall. Seeing this, Jesus whispers to his disciples "*Beware of those who like to walk around in robes and be greeted with respect, yet who devour the savings of the poor. They will be condemned.*" The disciples took in the grandeur of the temple itself, amazed at its large stones and high walls. But Jesus broke the reverie by commenting, "*Do you see these great buildings? I tell you not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.*" Tension like tritones. A dissonance leaving us with the question, "Can all this be resolved?"

At that moment, a poor woman approached the money boxes of the temple. From the humbleness of her gesture, it was clear that she'd dropped in the smallest of gifts—a couple pennies. No fancy robes for her; no hint of vanity or ostentation. Her simple act was noted by Jesus and pointed out to the disciples. And it has launched a hundred thousand sermons—especially on Stewardship Sundays. "*Behold the poor widow who gave everything she had, all she had to live on.*" The message is that we should do the same. And if you miss that message, the ushers with offering plates will gladly remind you of it. Yet even as the woman disappeared into the crowd after giving her modest offering, the tritone tension of that scene wasn't resolved.

Some preachers hold up the widow as an example we should emulate because of her sacrificial giving. Nothing was held back. All was given. But we must be careful about asking those who already give the most to give even more. It is unfair to pressure those cast in society's servant roles—often women, people of color, migrants—into surrendering even more of their resources, while others can e checks from the frothy excess of their personal wealth. It is unfair to tax things like food and gas but leave

untouched capital gains from investment accounts. And, if we're being totally honest, is it always right to demand sacrificial offerings to the church, when as an institution the church has a history of valorizing war, of excluding women, people of color, gays and lesbians while excusing racism, xenophobia and capitalist excesses? Tensions abound here and they don't go away just by noticing a poor widow who drops her two pennies into the offering plate.

Tensions are a part of all our lives. I mentioned how Leonard Bernstein consciously used the tritone interval to capture the tension at the heart of "West Side Story" —that modern re-telling of "Romeo and Juliet." The tritone was there when Riff told the riled-up gang members to "stay cool" or when Tony met Maria and sings about his impossible new love. The tritone is there at the very end when the gangs lay down their weapons and come together over Tony's dead body, rumbling in the bass as a reminder of the tensions that cost Tony his life.

The Christian story is also built around tensions. Opposites clash and cannot be ignored. A Messiah-king rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. A humble rabbi confounds the paid religious professional. Jesus, the young Galilean, stood as a prisoner before the might of Rome and the thrones of Herod and Pilate. His life ended on a wooden cross—a crucifixion meant as a cautionary tale to any who believed following this Jesus could easily resolve life's tensions.

As I said, tension is a part of my life and I'm sure of your life. But to resolve this tension, it is wise to listen to Jesus as he points out the widow leaving her humble offering. First, he intentionally told his disciples to see her, to take note of what she had done. Living in a world of tensions requires that we first see what is right in front of us, that we see the ones others are quick to overlook or ignore. Jesus knew that the first step in resolving tensions is to notice what's right before your eyes—the blind man or beggar longing to be made whole; the tax collector up in the sycamore tree wanting to be part of the community again; the little child some would push away but of such is the kingdom of God; the man behind bars caught in an unjust criminal justice system; the woman vulnerable to violence and sex trafficking simply because of her gender. Nothing gets better—no tensions are resolved—until we first look around and take notice.

Second, Jesus wants us to see that the woman made her gift publicly, stepping up to the treasury boxes in exactly the same way as the wealthy scribes with their fancy robes. She stepped into a place some associated only with power and privilege and did a public, humble act from her heart. By way of an analogy from American history, in 1797 there were many people who wanted George Washington to seek a third term as President of the United States. But he refused to do so. As important as it was to accept the presidential office, to him it was more important to publicly relinquish it after eight years. Washington gifted our nation with the example of a peaceful transfer of power from one president to the next. Tensions are only resolved when we act publicly, openly, doing what is right for all to see.

Third, despite real tensions today and the media's fixation on all that is broken in our world, there are good things happening. Nicholas Kristof is a well-known, New York Times columnist who is stepping down to run for governor of Oregon. Kristof routinely reports from the grimmest places on earth, but he also finds time to lift up the ways life is getting better. He recently reminded us that even with the Covid-pandemic, every day thousands of people worldwide are emerging from poverty. Hundreds of thousands get electricity for the first time or clean drinking water; homeless veterans are finding housing; and U.S. teenage pregnancy rates are down 73% from where they were 30 years ago. Jesus pointed out the widow and her humble offering as a reminder that good exists in this world. Small deeds of kindness abound. Everything has a consequence, especially that which is good and generous. So yes, there are reasons to keep on keepin' on.

Lastly, what the widow did on that day was an act of faithful trust. Her pennies did not move the temple's annual budget from loss to surplus. But they were a witness of trust and gratitude—and that was far more valuable. In a moment we'll receive pledge cards and food donations in a beloved, annual, chaotic parade for Stewardship Sunday. We could probably do this much more efficiently online—or by writing a big check from our endowment to the food bank. But we do it this way every year because it is a public act of praise, trust and gratitude. Then we will come forward again to receive communion – not because we've earned it or want to show off our fine robes, but as a simple act of trust and gratitude. God loved us enough to come into this world as God's Child, our Savior. Christ loved us enough to be a public witness of faith and hope in a world that chose to hurt and destroy him. The Spirit of God moved at creation and at the Easter re-creation to show that the tensions of life are not the final word of life. There is resurrection. There is hope. There is something more that we can trust and believe in.

Jesus wanted us to see the widow make her offering—so that we would be inspired to our own public witness of faith; that we will do our part to join in what is good and compassionate and righteous in this world; and that our lives—yes, even our financial lives—might be guided by a deep trust and heartfelt gratitude. Yes, tensions remain. As long as you live and breathe, that fact remains the same. But rejoice! To paraphrase one of Jesus' teachings, *"In this world you will know tension—you will hear tritones—but be not afraid, for I have overcome this world."*

Thanks be to God!