

November 10, 2024

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 12:38-44 (NRSV)

³⁸As 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, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

⁴¹He sat down opposite the treasury and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then 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. ⁴⁴For 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.”

Her Two Cents Worth

Retired United Methodist Bishop, William Willimon recalls a time when he was a young associate pastor at a large church that hired a professional church fundraiser to help with a large capital-campaign. At the initial meeting, the fund-raiser asked the church board about its goals for the campaign. Someone spoke up: “You must understand that we are a church that has a high percentage of older people, mostly widows on fixed incomes. So, we really can’t expect to raise too much money.”

The fund-raiser asked to see a list of the church’s major givers and took it with him at the close of the meeting. At the next meeting, the fund-raiser told the board that he had conducted an analysis of the congregation’s giving. “Please note,” he said, “that the majority of your top fifty contributors are ‘widows on fixed incomes.’ According to my calculations, those ‘widows on fixed incomes’ pay about sixty percent of this congregation’s annual budget. I’d say if you want to improve the giving in this church, you need to talk to those women first, find out

why they give, and then try to infect the rest of the congregation with the faith of these 'widows on fixed incomes.'"

"The Widow's Mite" is a classic Gospel story — who hasn't heard the moving account of the unnamed widow who slips quietly into the Temple, drops her meager offering into the treasury, and then, in the same way she entered, slips away into the ether? Who hasn't squirmed when a well-meaning pastor brings the story to its inevitable, "How, then, shall we live?" conclusion: "If a desperately poor widow can give her sacrificial bit, how much more should we — so comfortably wealthy by comparison — give out of our abundance to further the Lord's work?"

I'll admit it; I've squirmed, but not so much because the question indicts my giving. I've squirmed because this woman's brief appearance in Mark's Gospel haunts me; her story is sharp-edged and troubling. Something in me doesn't want her story reduced to a mere morality play or her memory exploited for the sake of church capital campaigns and annual budgets. Something inside of me feels indignant. I wish I knew her name. I wish I knew for sure that her real-life fierceness exceeded the piety we've imposed on her. I hope — *I hope* — she died in peace.

Died? Yes. *Died*. She died, probably not long after she dropped those two coins into the Temple treasury. In case that's a surprise, consider again what Jesus said about her as she left the Temple that day: "She out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." The Greek word behind "all she had to live on" is *bios* (from which we derive "biology"). It means "life." In other words, the widow sacrificed not only her meager offering but also *her whole life*.

What little that we do know about her is that she was a widow in first century Palestine, a woman living on the margins of her society. No husband to advocate for her, no pension to draw from, no social status to hide behind, and there was no social safety net available to provide for her. She was impoverished and vulnerable in every single way that mattered. Two pennies short of the end. If I'm getting the timing right, Jesus died four days after the events in this story. I wonder if the widow did, too.

So, here's why I'm troubled by this Gospel reading: what does it mean to applaud a destitute woman who gave her last two cents to the Temple, before slipping away to starve to death? Is this really a story of selflessness? Or is it a cautionary tale about naivete? Should we cheer? Should we weep? What are we to do with this text?

Mark prefaces the widow's offering with an account of Jesus blasting the religious leaders of his day for their greed, pomposity, and crass exploitation of the poor. "Beware of the scribes," Jesus tells his followers. "They devour widow's houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers." Their piety, in other words, is a sham, and the religious institution they govern is corrupt — certainly not in any way reflective of the God the Psalmist calls a "father of orphans and protector of widows."

Indeed, in the days leading up to the widow's last gift, Jesus offers one scathing critique after another about the economic and political exploitation he witnesses around him. He makes a mockery of Roman pomp and circumstance when he parades into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. He clears out the Temple's money-mongers with a whip, knocking over their tables. He refuses to answer the chief priests, scribes, and elders when they demand to know the source of his authority. He confounds religious leaders on taxes, indicts them with a scathing parable about a vineyard and a murdered son, defeats them on the question of resurrection, and bewilders them with riddles about his Davidic ancestry.

So why on earth would he turn around and praise a woman for endangering her already tenuous life to support an institution he considers corrupt? The simple answer is, he doesn't. Read the story carefully; he doesn't. Centuries of stewardship sermons notwithstanding, Jesus never commends the widow, applauds her self-sacrifice, or invites us to follow in her footsteps. All he does is simply *notice* her, and then instruct his disciples to notice her, too.

This is a moment in the story when I'd give anything to hear Jesus' tone of voice, and to see the expression on his face. Is he heartbroken as he tells his disciples to peel their eyes away from the rich folks and glance in her direction instead? Is he outraged? Is he resigned? Does he tell one of his friends to run after the woman

and give her a bit of bread or a drink of water? What does it mean to Jesus, mere seconds after he's described the Temple leaders as devourers of widows' houses, to witness just such a widow being devoured? And worse, participating in her own devouring?

The story has a telling postlude: immediately after the widow leaves the Temple, Jesus leaves, too, and as he does, an awed disciple invites Jesus to admire the Temple's mammoth stones and impressive buildings. Jesus' response is abrupt: "Not one of these stones will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." Ouch! I wonder if the widow is still on Jesus' mind as he predicts the destruction of the Temple. He has just watched a trusting woman give her all to a fraudulent institution, one that refuses to protect the poor. No edifice steeped in such injustice will stand.

Back to my earlier question: should we cheer or weep in the face of this story? Or — perhaps there's a third alternative — should we call out (as Jesus did) any form of religiosity that manipulates the vulnerable into self-harm and self-destruction? Any form of piety that privileges long-winded prayers over works of compassion and liberation? Any version of Christianity that valorizes soul-killing suffering as redemptive? Any practice of faith that coddles us into apathy in the face of economic, racial, gender, and political injustice?

Jesus *notices* the widow. He sees what everyone else is too busy, too grand, too spiritual, and too self-absorbed to see. For me, this is the only redemptive part of the story — that Jesus' eyes are ever on the small, the insignificant, the unloved, and the hidden. What exactly did Jesus notice about this woman? I don't know for sure, but I'll hazard some guesses.

I think he noticed the widow's courage. I imagine it took quite a bit of courage for her to make her "insignificant" gift alongside the rich with their fistfuls of coins. Even more to allow the last scraps of her security to fall out of her palms. And more *still* to swallow panic, desperation, and the entirely human desire to cling to life no matter what — and face her end with hope.

I think Jesus noticed her dignity. Surely, she had to steel herself when widowhood rendered her societally worthless — a person marked "expendable" even by the Temple she loved. Surely, she had to trust — in the face of all the evidence piled up around her — that her tiny gift had value in God's eyes. In her astonishing generosity, Jesus recognized a kind of power: those two coins were her gestures of defiance. They marked her subversive resistance to the dehumanization of the poor and vulnerable.

And finally, I think Jesus noticed her vocation. Whether she knew it or not, the widow's action in the Temple that day was prophetic. She was a prophet in the sense that her costly offering amounted to a holy denunciation of injustice and corruption. Without speaking a word, she spoke *God's* Word in the ancient tradition of Isaiah, Elijah, Jeremiah, and the other Old Testament prophets.

But she was also prophetic in the Messianic sense because her self-sacrifice prefigured Jesus' self-sacrifice. She, too, gave up her life in the face of the unjust system that exploited her. Perhaps what Jesus noticed was kinship with her — her story mirroring his own. The widow gave everything she had to serve a world so broken; it killed her. Just a few days later, Jesus gave everything he had to redeem, restore, and renew that world.

So, what now? Where do we go with this story? Do we place this woman on a pedestal of marble, a statue that we roll out of the closet once a year, clear off the cobwebs and sweep off the dust and say, "Look at this woman and her sacrifice," followed by an emotional appeal from a representative of the finance committee to give more to the church? Do we objectify this unnamed woman without entering more deeply into her story? Is she simply a cog in the wheel of a larger, and unjust system? Or is her story something more, more than about tithes or offerings or budgets or pledge cards? Does it not offer those of us who participate in the temple life of our day a word of caution about how we sometimes use our religious doctrines and dogmas to control or manipulate or oppress those who occupy the fringes of our society, those whose support systems are fragile at best, those whom we think are undeserving of our best efforts to help them? Does this story not stand as a warning against our proclivities toward words and actions that

laud our own merits, achievements, accomplishments, and credentials in front of others so that they may look up to us rather than notice those persons around us who are in the most need of their time and attention?

Might this woman, this unnamed widow — more than a token example of sacrificial giving — offer us a mirror in which we see ourselves, an honest reflection that reminds us of the necessity, the urgency, and the importance of humility, and quiet dignity, and perseverance in all our efforts to live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our world?

Benediction

Go out and share God's love with all.

Do not slave for things that are not life-giving,

but trust in God's provision and give generously of all you have.

And may God watch over you and provide for you;

May Christ Jesus be to you a restorer of life;

and may the Holy Spirit lead you in the ways of humble generosity.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. **Amen.**