

OUT OF HER POVERTY

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Psalm 126; Mark 12:38-44

The story of the widow's mite is one of those heartwarming and lovely stories that were it not found in the Bible would surely be found in folklore nonetheless. What are celebrated here are the simple virtues of generosity, humility, and quiet extravagance spent in love. It doesn't hurt that the heroine of the story is a widow, noticed by Jesus, who had a soft heart for widows, making me wonder if therein may be a clue as to why we hear so little of Joseph, Mary's husband, after the birth of Jesus, and whether he may have died early in Jesus' childhood.

There is ample evidence that the Bible has a special concern for fair treatment of widows. The Book of Deuteronomy tells us that one of the attributes of God, in contrast to Jesus characterization of the scribes, is that God "executes justice for the orphan and widow..."¹

Psalm 94 sounds vaguely like today's lesson, when the psalmist decries the wicked who pour out their arrogant words, crushing the people, killing the widow and murdering the orphan."²

In the gospels, widows draw Jesus' particular compassion. He tells a parable about a widow who repeatedly implores a judge for justice, a widow who finally so wears the judge down that he is embarrassed into doing the right thing. And again, in Luke's gospel, Jesus heals the only son of a woman who was a widow, a healing that has reminded many of the story in the Old Testament when Elijah came to a widow in Zarephath and raised her son from the dead.

But nowhere are widows given more thoughtful consideration than they are in the 12th chapter of Mark's gospel, where there are three references to the circumstances of widows. First, there's that question the scribes ask Jesus that I mentioned last week, a question about a woman who was widowed and who married in turn the six younger brothers of her first husband. A conundrum that Jesus managed well.

Next, Jesus warns his disciples in the passage we read at the outset of today's lesson that they are to beware of the scribes, the religious folks who like to go around in long robes and receive salutations in the market place and feast on sumptuous meals with the rich and who say long prayers. Hypocrites! "Beware of them," Jesus said, "they devour widows houses."

And immediately after saying that comes our lesson today. Jesus takes a seat opposite the temple treasury where he watches people putting in their offerings. There were many folks who were well off who made a show of flashing their large checks and their stock transfers and their big bills before dropping them in the coffers. In practical terms, such a show was to be expected, I suppose. After all, if you're going to do some good, why not do some good for yourself as well? In that vein, how many politicians this week will be visiting the senior centers or ladling chicken gumbo at the free soup kitchen now that the cameras are off and the votes are in?

What really caught Jesus' eye among all the donors at the temple was a widow who approached the alms box very cautiously, a woman wrapped in black, scarf over her head, her face mostly covered as modest women of the Middle East do, especially when

unaccompanied by a man. She pulled from the folds of her stole two small coins, two *leptons* in Greek, the smallest coins in circulation in Palestine, each one worth approximately 1/128 of what a laborer might expect to earn in a day's time. The King James Version calls these coins *mites*, and the modern translations call them pennies, but whatever you call them, they were not much.

Not much, except that they represented everything that she had. There was nothing more left after the two pennies were gone, nothing more for her to spend, nothing for dinner that night, nothing for breakfast in the morning, nothing left over to keep her going. She gave it all.

Now there are two things that are memorable about this story aside from its obvious appeal as the least likely giving the most generously. One memorable issue has to do with *how much* she gave, of course, and the other has to do with *to whom* she gave what she did.

First, how much she gave... There are many stories of generous giving in the Bible, and the one that most closely resembles this story of the widow's mite is another story from Mark's gospel of a woman at the home of Simon, a leper. She came to the dinner party where Jesus attended with a jar of very costly ointment, and she broke open the jar and poured it on Jesus' head, a lavish display of extravagance. The disciples criticized her for doing this because the oil could have been sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor, or so they said. But Jesus defended her because he said she was anointing his body for burial, linking what she did with his death.

The two stories of these women and their extravagant acts are linked to Jesus' death because Jesus, himself, lays down an extravagant amount, like the woman with the ointment who anointed him, like the widow who gave all that she had, as Jesus said, her whole "living." For Jesus, it would be his whole life that he would pour out and give away on the cross, an extravagant act beyond description, a metric against which measure all our generosity pales.

While the difference in monetary value between the two women's gifts is vast (two mites are no comparison with three hundred denarii the worth of a year's wages) they both represent nearly unimaginable generosity in spiritual terms, because as that measure of devotion is counted, they were exceedingly costly to both.

Those who made a show of their gifts at the temple, who dropped large amounts in the treasury coffers, gave out of the surplus of what they had left over. There is no question that their gifts were needed at the temple to pay the Con Ed bill and the oil for the lamps and the heat for the winter, the practical things that were necessary in the temple. And as practical things go, the large gifts were important, helpful, even crucial to the survival of the temple, but they just weren't of the same value spiritually as was the widow's two cents which represented all that she had.

The ostentatious givers gave out of their wealth. But this widow gave out of her poverty, out of the essential substance of what she had, just as Jesus did. Having only what she had to give, she gave it all.

That being said, it's also important to ask a question about the recipient of the widow's generosity. After all, she gave all that she had *to the temple*. And while on the face of it, that might sound like a good place to give your most generous gift, in truth, gifts given to the temple in Jesus' time may not have been all that wisely given.

Money entrusted to the temple was money used to support the very scribes whom Jesus criticized as hypocrites, those who liked to parade around in long robes and receive salutations in the market place and be invited to sumptuous dinners and who devoured widow's houses. The money given to the temple supported a compromised institution with morally suspect scribes at its head.

In recent years, Biblical scholars have called into question this story of the widow because there is no social critique of the corruption of the temple mentioned. It's an interesting sidelight I suppose, but I think that such a critique is only part of the issue. The widow's gift, after all, is given not to support the corruption of the temple but given in spite of it. That part of why the story is remembered at all. And there is a certain honor conferred in the widow's gift, given in pure motive, regardless of what happened to it after that. By her gift, she established a higher accountability for the institution to which she gave, and we know that when the institution does not live up to it, all the greater is the failure. Therein lies something of importance for us to consider today.

Americans are a generous people, giving billions of dollars in contributions to worthy causes every year. We like to be assured that the causes we support are not top heavy in administrative costs, and that the money given actually reaches those who are most in need, providing them services, supplies, and relief. Nothing is more disturbing than to find an organization that you have trusted is misusing your money, or that its leaders have been profiting in high salaries while programs go under-funded.

This is always a concern in church giving, and I am very grateful that the pastors and officers of this church have always dealt responsibly with the financial trust placed in them by the congregation.

Sometimes it's not the finances, however, that are called into question but the leaders. That was the case in Jesus day. And it is the case today as well, as we have seen in this past week when a nationally prominent pastor fell from grace by misrepresenting his identity, privately paying for sex with a male prostitute, while publicly opposing legal protections for gay and lesbian citizens. He participated in regular conference calls with other evangelical mega-pastors strategizing with advisors in the White House on an agenda of oppression against gay people. It was a most unfortunate revelation, and a sad personal tragedy, given the inordinate influence of a few pastors on the moral agenda of American politics recently.

Let me be quick to say, there is not a pastor's home that I have known, in which the person who ministers to the humanity and failures of others has not at some time agonized over his or her own humanity and failure. A wife, a husband, a life partner of a clergy person can tell you stories of their spouse's humanity that is painful to hear. Everyone who has made a promise of constancy to another human being can tell you that marriage has its ups and downs, its strong periods and its weak; times when the fabric of the relationship is worn, and times when it must be re-woven. And most *unfortunate* is the one whose private failures unravel in a public way. This is especially sad when one's public image is so poorly integrated with one's inner self that the two make opposite witnesses.

Clergy fail, priests lose sight of their calling, ministers do not live up to the gospel they preach. There is no getting around it. It's an old, old story. There is no great religious figure of notable public memory who has not anguished over painful and sometimes morally ambiguous private struggles. We forget that Moses murdered an

Egyptian overseer, a crime that caused him to run from the authorities and live in secret. Jacob nearly tore his family apart when he plotted with his mother and tricked his father and stole his brother's birthright. David lost control of his passion and had an affair with Bathsheba, then compounded the sin by plotting her husband's death. Even Peter denied Jesus three times on the one night when Jesus most needed a friend. If gold rusts, what will iron do? All of these frail and human servants were compromised before God. God's servants are human. It will always be that way.

Remember the words of Isaiah when confronted with the call to be a prophet. He said, "Woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips." Yet, "here am I, Send me."

The imperative that the story of the widow's mite places before the church and its leaders, in spite of their fallibility, is that the least coin of the most generous giver must always be faithfully used. Whether the amount given is large or small, every gift must be considered the most sacrificial gift a person could give, the widow's mite, and therefore faithfully administered.

I look around this church and feel pretty good about what we are doing as stewards of what the congregation gives. The nursery school, the Caring Community feeding seniors at lunchtime, the after school program, the First Kids events, the choirs that sing in our worship, the staff that works hard to maintain these old buildings, the pastors who counsel, and visit in the nursing home, and teach classes, and pray in the hospital with those who are sick, support a family in a time of grief, and lead in worship each Sunday; these are all concrete expressions of what your pennies and dollars and pledges do. The church tries to be a faithful steward of what it is given, even as each of us attempts to be the best steward we can be with what God has given us.

It's Stewardship Dedication Sunday, and in a few moments we will ask you to take the pledge card that you have brought with you this week, or take the one that is in the pew in front of you and fill it in, having given prayerful thought as to what your commitment should be, and place that card in the offering plate when it comes by. Then when the cards are brought forward, they will be dedicated to God's work and service in the coming year.

We make these pledges each year as a sign of our commitment to discipleship and servanthood. We do it trusting that while the church is only a fallible, human expression of a heavenly reign which is yet to come, it is still one of the best ways on earth of doing God's work.

You know this story of the widow and her offering in the temple, is a masterfully crafted story. Because in the telling of someone like Jesus it is a story with a surprise ending that catches you off guard, in fact you may not at first quite understand what he means. I'm not sure the Twelve did at first. You can hear it either as a story of great encouragement as we offer what little we have, or a story of painful judgment as we give amply from what we have left over, and if the story is at all instructive about how to handle your generosity, you'd best keep to yourself which story it is that you have heard.

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¹ Deut 10:17

² Ps 94: 4-5 paraphrased.