

Sermon for November 7, 2021—“The Widow’s Mite Redux”

OT32, Year B—Texts: James 1:9-11, 17-18, 22-25, 27; Mark 12:35-44

I’m willing to bet that when I’m done, you will have expected a different sermon. The truth is that what I’m about to say isn’t what I’d planned either.

As this is Stewardship season, I’d planned to talk about the Widow’s Mite which is this morning’s lectionary reading, noting her total generosity of spirit. I was going to say that any act of generosity comes first from the mind and from the heart and how mighty her spirit of generosity must have been, to give every bit of money she had, much the same way that the widow of Zarephath had given her last morsel of food to feed Elijah—the prophet of God. Now, I’m not saying that isn’t at least one of the lessons to be learned here.

I mean, for centuries, Christians have assumed that Jesus wants us to emulate the poor widow’s sacrificial giving of her last two coins. Jesus’ commentary makes it clear that the widow felt the impact of her contribution, much more than all the rich people giving money they didn’t need. She gave the only money she had to buy food to survive. Her sacrifice had painful consequences in her poverty.

So, we’ve historically assumed that Jesus is commending the widow’s example to us. And I’m guessing you’ve heard that one already—more than once. So it occurred to me to do some research. In particular, research on the mite itself, wanting to learn a little more about this coin of such small monetary value. In the process, I came across a commentary by scholar and seminary professor Paul Penley that pointed me in a completely different direction. An unexpected direction. I will never think of this story quite the same way ever again.

What I found was the observation that Jesus never holds the widow up as an example to be followed. He never says that she did the right thing. What *does* Jesus say? Well, he simply states the fact that the rich people made a big show over their generosity, and gave some of their abundant wealth away, while the poor widow gave everything she had to live on. That got me thinking about what else Jesus does, and, just as crucially, what Jesus doesn’t do in this story.

First, though, what does Jesus actually do? Well, what Jesus does is intentionally sit in the temple, opposite the treasury, specifically watching all of the people make their financial contributions. That’s it. That’s all he does. An odd thing to do don’t you think? What he *doesn’t* do is this: He never makes a financial contribution himself. He sits there watching, and gives nothing, even after seeing the poor widow give everything she has.

Nor does Jesus urge his disciples to make a contribution to the temple’s treasury. Furthermore, even though he knows that the poor widow has given everything she has to live on, Jesus does not give her anything, nor does he suggest that one of the disciples give her a coin or two, so that she has something to live on. I’d like to think that maybe one of the disciples slipped her something. Just saying.

Either way, Jesus just sits there watching. And I think he keeps getting angrier and angrier. I believe it fuels his desire to cleanse the temple of such oppressive corruption of God's house by the temple authorities. A temple that at one time had been a house of prayer, a home to the holy of holies, where God Himself dwelt, but which now stands as a monument to injustice and corruption, greed and human pride.

We heard, in our reading from Mark, that Jesus has already warned his listeners, to beware of the scribes. **“They devour widows’ houses, and for the sake of appearances, say long prayers,”** he tells them. So, perhaps the widow isn't giving from a spirit of generosity at all, but from a sense of guilt; a burden that had been placed upon her by religious authorities.

Perhaps after giving the temple treasury her last mite, she'll lose her house to them, and they can sell it for a profit. I'm guessing, as Jesus himself may have, that the poor widow would probably pass any kindly donation she received straight on the temple treasury. Perhaps that's why neither Jesus, nor his disciples give her anything. All that said, I think it's important to note what Jesus does next. I believe that it gives us an insight into his thinking, as he watches the financial transactions in the temple.

As he's leaving, without making a contribution, someone marvels over the magnificence of the temple. “What massive stones,” they say. Jesus is not impressed. **“Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another. All will be thrown down,”** he flatly replies.

He sees injustice. He sees a corrupt system. He sees a system that no longer honors God's heart to care for the needy, no longer lifts up the poor, and disenfranchised. He sees a system where those who lead, those who ought to know better, no longer honor the intent—the Spirit—of the Law. Instead, the system has constructed lavish buildings, and pay lip service to serving God, while ignoring what they've been expressly called to do, and prey upon the weak. That's why he isn't impressed by the “large stones” and “great buildings” in the Temple complex.

Jesus was intentionally highlighting the widow's gift in the Temple as an illustration of just how messed up Jerusalem was—how corrupt the religious system was in its time. In condemning it—and make no mistake, he was condemning it—Jesus was doing what prophets like Amos and Isaiah, Ezekiel and Elijah did before him. The widow's mite is evidence of what Ezekiel saw in the first Temple over 600 years earlier. He wrote, **“The people of the land have practiced oppression, and committed robbery, and they have wronged the poor and needy, and have oppressed the sojourner without justice.”**

In that context of prophetic judgment against corrupt systems the widow's offering takes on a much different meaning than we first suspect. It says, if nothing else, that God's not a fan of them! So, the widow's offering is an illustration of injustice, not generosity. The widow's livelihood was being devoured by a system with wealthy religious teachers acting not unlike those TV evangelists peddling the prosperity gospel today, those who convince people to send in their money, so they can use it to buy private airplanes and lavish mansions, while doing nothing to help those for whom they pretend to care.

But—and make no mistake—this isn't just about people like Joel Osteen and Creflo Dollar. It's about us too, and not just about our giving, which should be as generously given as the Widow's mite appeared to be! It's about how we think about our faith, and about our churches.

In our first reading, James, the brother of Jesus makes it clear: **“Religion,”** and James was referring mainly to worship here, **“that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: To care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”** And I don't think it's a stretch to believe that both James and Jesus believe in what God had mandated in the Book of Deuteronomy: **“Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’”**

And brothers and sisters, here's the thing: I'm absolutely convinced that Jesus came to change human hearts and minds; to free them, and offer new ways of thinking, living, and being. But I also believe—every bit as strongly—that Jesus came not just to call out corrupt systems, like the one in the Temple, but to tear them down, and replace them. He calls us to that same work today. This demand for justice, to end systemic poverty and , corruption, could hardly be more relevant in churches today. The battle has been joined, and we've been called to join the fight. It needs us. It needs us now!

A few weeks ago, I said that we are a Matthew 25 church. I said that we, as a church, are called, “...to be actively engaged in the world around us, so our faith comes alive, awakened to new possibilities, to become a more relevant presence in the world. It means that we're called to be “...a church of action, where God's love, justice, and mercy shine forth, and are contagious.” I said too that we're to be focused, not just our own revitalization, but also to be engaged in the work of dismantling structural racism, and eradicating systemic poverty. Not just one or two—all three. That's it. No more. No less. Today, I would add—as it is Stewardship season after all—that it will require our time, our talent, and our treasure.

Systems of domination, corruption, oppression, and injustice will not last forever. They have nothing to do with the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of Heaven may be near, but it is far away from the temple treasury. Distant, still, from those who hold positions of power and influence, those who—like those in Jesus' time—claim God on their side, all while maintaining corrupt systems today, with the temple treasury in their heart. Jesus said, “Where you treasure is, there your heart is also.”

What about us?

Where are our hearts? What's in our hearts? What will we give? How will we give? When will we give? What will we do? How will we do it? When will we do it?

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.