

The Widow's Mite

Mark 12:38-44

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Today's sermon is entitled, "The Widow's Mite."

I'm not talking about this kind of mite.

But this one. A "mite" is the very smallest copper coin that was used in that day. The poor widow technically has two mites or coins. Please do not think that the poor widow was giving two insects to the temple treasury.

Now, I love opposites.

When I was teaching, I would have students point out the opposites in the New Testament passage that they were investigating. We have lots of opposites here, principally "abundance and scarcity (or poverty)," and similarly, rich and poor, people and a widow, large sums and two small copper coins. So, we have lots of opposites here.

And of those opposites, the widow seems to be privileged, honored, raised up for special attention.

Indeed, my study Bible, the New Oxford Annotated Bible says, "The story highlights the exemplary devotion of a widow, whose social position is marginal" (p. 1855). Well, if it has the name "Oxford" on it, it's got to be true, right? Those brilliant Brits wouldn't lead us astray, would they? This widow gave all that she had to the temple, so you should give all that you have to the church. Just take out your checkbook, and whatever your balance, just write a check for that and put it in the offering plate.

No, don't do that. If you will read closely the passage for today, Jesus does not commend or condemn the actions of the rich people or the poor widow.

Both Mark and Jesus emphasize the widow's poverty. She is described as the "poor widow." That is a redundancy. Generally, widows were poor, because their husband, their principal means of support had died.

But Jesus says in the previous passage that scribes have been devouring the widows' houses. Therefore, this poor widow is homeless. Apparently, she lives in the temple. So, Jesus sits down in the temple opposite the treasury. And he scopes out how the crowd throws money into the treasury. Yes, the word which is translated "put in" in the New Revised Standard Version means "throw" or "cast."

Many rich folks throw in much. They throw in plenty of Benjamins, that is, they throw in lots of \$100 bills.

(People do not know that US currency was accepted in first-century Jerusalem, but it was.)

Then a poor widow comes

And she throws in just a couple of copper coins, which is only worth a penny.

Jesus then calls his disciples and says to them, "This poor widow threw into the treasury more than anybody who threw in. Because everybody threw in from their abundance, but she threw in from her scarcity, from her lack, from her poverty, all that she had, her entire livelihood."

And that's the end of the story. Jesus and his disciples walk out of the temple after that, and the disciples ooh and aah all about the temple, and Jesus says that it will be destroyed.

He spends the next chapter talking about the coming destruction of the temple, which happened a generation after Jesus lived.

But we don't want to talk about the destruction of the temple. We want to talk about this widow and her mite. We want to applaud the widow. Yay, poor widow! You gave all that you had for the temple. How sacrificial. How noble! And we want to boo the rich: "Boo, hiss, rich people! You just gave a little bit of your vast fortunes. You could have done so much more. How stingy! How self-centered!" We just look at the picture. Look at how pretty and young and innocent the widow is. And look how ugly and old and wizened these rich people are. Good widow, bad rich people!

But I want to do something radical with this story: I want to read it--carefully. Notice that there are MANY rich people there. They are throwing in "large sums." The many rich people are contrasted with the one "poor widow." She throws in two copper coins, worth a penny. Jesus comments: The poor widow has thrown in more than everybody because all the rich folk threw in from their abundance, and she threw in from her poverty everything, her entire life.

It is important to realize that all this is taking place in the temple. These people are contributing to the upkeep of the temple—not just the maintenance of buildings and grounds, but of the sacrificial system. It is this system that Jesus is against, at least in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus acts against the temple in chapter 11. He drives out the buyers and the sellers, the money-changers and the dove-sellers.

We usually call this incident the "cleansing of the temple," but Jesus is not cleansing the temple. He is symbolically destroying it. Because people have made God's house of prayer a den of robbers, God will destroy the temple.

Jesus was certainly not the first prophet to predict the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. Isaiah and Jeremiah had. For Jewish prophets, from Jeremiah to Jesus, the temple was no longer the place where people could meet God.

In our story, however, people are contributing to the temple. No matter if they are rich or if they are poor, they are supporting a failing institution. Jesus doesn't condemn them, nor does he commend them. He lets you make the decision. Was the poor widow's action good or not? Is it to be imitated? What do you think?

I will tell you what I think: The poor widow was giving her entire livelihood to a place that was no longer serving God. The temple authorities were in cahoots with the Romans just so that the temple folks could do their business. In other words, the temple was a “den of robbers” because Jews and pagans were working together to keep it standing. This poor widow did not know this. She was helping to support God’s house, which was also her house. She did not realize that God had left and would not return.

Incidentally, when the temple was destroyed in 70, it was never rebuilt. The Muslim Dome of the Rock appears there now. Near the site, however, there is a scale model of the temple and Jerusalem at the time of Jesus.

I do not encourage you, then, to use the poor widow as a model here. The widow in Jesus’ day had a marginal social position. The Hebrew prophets condemn those who take advantage of widows.¹ And throughout Scripture, widows are mentioned as folks for whom God’s people should care for.

So, this poor widow is just doing what she can do to survive. God has been good to her, so she gives her offering to God in God’s house. But the temple is no longer God’s house. Jesus’ project of the reign of God, the kingdom of God, the kin-dom of God, is where God now lives. God’s house is now a motorhome, motoring all over Judea and Galilee proclaiming the good news to the poor. Get on board, little children, there’s room for many a more!

What does this passage have to do with Consecration Sunday? The temple was a failing institution, even a failed institution, which both rich and poor were supporting. Is First Church also a failing, even a failed institution, which we are supporting?

With the help of the library staff, I have been looking in the archives. First Church of Christ West Hartford was featured in the journal *Christian Century* in 1950 as one of the great churches in country—not just in CT but in the US of A. At that time the church had almost two thousand members. Now the church has just over 400. That’s an 80% decline in 70 years.

So, do we conclude that God is no longer here?

But the kingdom of God, the kin-dom, the power of God is still happening here. Whenever there is peace, joy, patience, love, then God is here. God is here. God is still in this place.

The church will need to make some hard decisions in the next several years about its future. It will require praying and planning and surveying and dreaming and visioning and talking and praying and talking and . . . You get the picture. What is God doing in this place at this corner of West Hartford Center, adjacent to Blue Back Square?

The question is, where are you going to “throw in” your money?

The widow offers you her mite. What does she say to you? God speaks to you through her.

¹ Isaiah 10:1-2; Zechariah 7:10; Malachi 3:5. See *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 1854.

I would like to close with what this poor widow is saying to me:

You see this mite (M-I-T-E).
It is my might (M-I-G-H-T). My power.
Don't be dour in this hour.
It will flower and grow and bloom and go boom right here, right now.
It will go pow! Ow, you may say.
Yes, it will hurt, don't mean to be curt.
The kingdom of God, the kin-dom of God, the power of God.
I give this to you. To you.
To you.
Amen.

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