

The Widow's Mite  
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November 10, 2024 – Pentecost 25B  
Mark 12:38-44

The last time the so-called story of the widow's mite actually popped up in the lectionary, right after the midterm elections in 2018, the world seemed like a vastly different place. Life was what we knew as more or less "normal." The pandemic wouldn't happen for another year or so. Things were sort of okay for most of us, despite the steady stream of governmental chaos coming out of Washington, and so we may have collectively felt a bit more optimistic about the future than we do right now. People also seemed to be a lot nicer to each other – at least, one was far less likely to encounter adults engaged in public screaming matches or to be harassed and/or doxxed online for expressing an opinion someone else didn't like.

It's more than a little ironic to me that, in this week when we've survived another contentious election, the lectionary has served this one up again. When we take it against the background of Jesus' teaching in the Jerusalem temple in the last few days of his life, we see and hear in it a hard lesson contrasting the abuse of power with trusting totally in God. That's kind of the moment we're in right now. While we do not know what will happen in the coming months, it already demands that we consider, carefully, how we are going to respond to both the contrast between the scribes of our day who can, and will, misuse their authority and privilege at the expense of the poor, and the widow who literally entrusts her whole life to God's provision when she drops the only two pennies she has to her name into the collection plate.

Believe it or not, the story of the widow's mite, as both Mark and Luke tell it, is really not about stewardship. Sure, we could use it to suggest that her act of sacrificial

giving is something to be emulated. The down side to that approach is that not only does it miss the point Jesus is trying to make about the scribes who don't practice what they preach, but it defangs the widow's actions.

Do you notice that, despite her status as a marginalized person, she has agency? *Nobody* forces her to do this. That might be why Jesus notices and points her out to the disciples sitting there with him. He's not praising her, at least not overtly. He's calling attention to her to make the point that discipleship does not, in action, resemble the actions of the scribes who use their positions of power to take advantage of the vulnerable. She instead embraces the choice to give everything away in service of God.<sup>1</sup> Her actions fit Mark's criteria for being a model disciple perfectly. She gives up everything and puts her whole trust in God's faith and love, which stands in direct contrast to characters like the rich young ruler, who, when asked to do the same, just can't let go.

It's remarkable that Jesus, as a male rabbi, even notices her in the first place, much less says anything to anyone else about her. That's good news. It tells us that God cares deeply about ... "her plight and recognizes her affliction. This God will not countenance... abuse – even and especially under the guise of religious piety – and so decries those who would order their world and their religion to make such sacrifices necessary... [that Jesus notices her, and points her out suggests] God also sees our

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew McGowan, "The Widow Strikes Back." <https://abmcg.substack.com/p/the-widow-strikes-back> [accessed November 4, 2024].

struggles, recognizes our challenges, cares about where we are hard pressed to make ends meet."<sup>2</sup>

The slightly disturbing element in this story is how we all too often find the widow's sacrifice, and ones like it, so enchanting. The ethicist and womanist scholar Emilie Townes frames the issue this way: "Why do we valorize sacrifice? This valorization is more than a slow mulling over its Latin roots, which combine "sacred" and "to make" so that sacrifice is something of value offered as an act of devotion or worship to God. In today's world, it often means giving up more than we could and less than we can... and at times it seems that sacrifice is best when someone else is doing it."<sup>3</sup>

This is the idea that Jesus is promoting here: putting our trust in God is a costly proposition – perhaps especially so when it seems like it will cost us everything. It is also what following Jesus demands of us. I know that seems very hard right now, given how many of us have been asking questions like "Why and how – and did God let this happen?" over the past few days. You've heard me say this before, but it bears repeating: how and why are not the right questions to ask – at least, not right now, when emotions are running so high. It's more helpful to take a breath and say, "OK. this thing happened. What we know for certain is, a lot of people are OK with it. A lot of people are also not OK with it. What can we do respond to it, and in a way which honors our

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<sup>2</sup> David Lose, "Pentecost 24B: Surprisingly Good News." <https://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/Pentecost-24-b-surprisingly-good-news> [accessed November 4, 2024].

<sup>3</sup> Emilie Townes, "Theological Perspective: Mark 12:38-44. In *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4: Season after Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ)*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 286.

commitments to love our neighbors, strive for justice and peace, and respect the dignity of every human being?"

The last time something like this happened on such a large scale, back in 2016, that question became central. I think it will become even more important as we navigate through these uncertain times. The ideal that everyone is on equal footing regardless of where we've come from, and the expectation that we will live long and prosper, are what form the backbone of this nation. And just as it was with our ancestors in the faith, our fears, which are at least partly grounded in the reality of the world around us, are trying once more to get the upper hand.

Instead of giving in to fear, let's try putting our faith in God's proven ability to bring to life things like the prophet Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom – where the lion will lie down with the lamb and none will "hurt or destroy on all [God's] holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Isa 11:9, NRSVue). These two things, hope and faith, must be what guide our words and actions in the days to come. In his letter to the diocese following the 2016 election, Rhode Island Bishop Nicholas Knisely wrote, "We must remember our baptismal covenant in which we promise to uphold the dignity of every person. We are each made in the image of God – and each one of us is infinitely precious simply by virtue of that fact. We can help others to see their neighbors as the Holy Spirit has opened our eyes to see one another."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> W. Nicholas Knisely, "A Divided Community: Responding with Hope and Action." <http://episcopalri.org/ForClergyCongregations/ResourceLibrary/ViewArticle/tabid/96/ArticleId/135/From-Bishop-Knisely-in-response-to-the-2016-elections.aspx>. [Accessed November 7, 2024.]

Getting to a place where we'll be able to do so will not be easy. For many right now, it is very hard to have any hope at all that things will ever get better. For others, it's a whole new day, with entirely new opportunities to help shape this country for future generations. And still others are caught in the middle, wondering not only what will come next, but also desperately trying to make leaders listen to them and take action about their concerns. Reconciling all of these things begins with listening to each other. Our response must not be one of judgment, but instead one of prayer. Once we have listened and prayed, then we will act. We have been presented with an incredible chance to show the world that the Gospel we proclaim is still relevant. We can, and we **MUST**, make this our primary task, because God needs us to be agents of God's justice and love in the world, now more than ever.

The outcome of this election has not changed the fact that we still have a lot of work to do. And it starts right here, in our smallish corner of this vast country, with us continuing to engage the mission of feeding our neighbors. To put it in terms of Mark's Gospel, let us live like the widow and lean into our commitments as people of faith. Like Jesus, let us not lose sight of the neighbors who look like her. Let us not hesitate to call out the scribes of our day when we see them devouring widows' houses, or worse. May God who has given us the will to do these things grant us the power to perform them.