

### **Mark 12:38-44 (NRSV)**

As 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, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then 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. For 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."

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Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

A couple of years ago, Linda and I vacationed in the Netherlands and we were fortunate enough to get to see Vermeer's painting, "Girl with a Pearl Earring." This is an absolutely wonderful painting and we went back to visit it several times. One of the reasons is that each time we viewed it, we noticed something different. Later on, I read a little bit about Vermeer, partly because I was so taken with this painting, and I learned, among other things, that we don't know very much about him and we know almost nothing about his model for this painting, the girl wearing the pearl earring. There was a novel and a movie about her some years ago, but that was pure fiction. Although this is one of the most famous paintings in history, we know almost nothing about the artist or his subject.

I thought about this as I walked with the Gospel text for today and I noticed the similarities between this text and the Vermeer painting. First, the text, like the painting, is famous. Second, it's a little open-ended – each time we return to it, we see something different. Third, we know almost nothing about the widow of the “Widow's Mite,” just as we know almost nothing about the girl in the painting.

As I thought back on the sermons I have heard and read about the “widow's mite,” they usually treated the text as Jesus speaking glowingly about the stewardship of this poor widow lady, about sacrificial giving, about motivations for giving, about guidelines for how and how much to give. It's a wonderful lesson for stewardship season here as November begins. But as I walked with this text, I kept seeing other lessons as well.

One clue is in Jesus' warnings about the scribes. Scribes in Mark's Gospel usually are seen as corrupted representatives of a corrupt institution, the Temple. Scribes were the people who learned and applied the law to problems of everyday life – disputes over property, over debts, over relationships and economics and morality. As important members of the community, some of them became a bit puffed up, a bit too self-important, demanding respect and places of honor.

Jesus is saying that these scribes, these leaders of the religious life of the community weren't living out the values of that community. It's no accident that Jesus mentions that these scribes “devour widows' houses,” that is, that they accept and even require payments from widows, the people with the fewest resources in that community. No accident, because the very next thing we hear about is a widow giving her offering to the Temple treasury.

The widow comes and puts her two copper coins, all she has to live on, into the offering. Jesus notes this, notes that some

contributed out of their abundance, but that out of her poverty, the widow put in everything she had. Now, generations of preachers have looked at what Jesus says as being appreciative, but as I walked with the text, I wasn't so sure.

In the very next sentence in Mark's Gospel, Jesus and the disciples leave the Temple and go outside and say, "Teacher, look at the Temple, at these large stones and large buildings," and Jesus tells them that this Temple will be thrown down, with not one stone upon the other. This temple, one of the greatest buildings of the ancient world, will be thrown down. And the widow has given her very livelihood to this institution that will shortly be swept away.

You see, I don't think this story is only or even primarily about how much we should give to the church or what our attitude about giving should be. At least partly, it is about what the priorities of the faith community are and ought to be. Would you want to be part of a community of faith that was funded by taking the last pennies of people who have nothing? Would you want to be part of a community of faith that is all about displays of piety while it neglects the needs of its poorest members? I sure wouldn't. And I doubt Jesus would be, either.

No, you would want to be part of a faith community that supports the poor, that gives out of its blessings to share with those who have less. You would want to be part of a faith community that is grateful for its blessings, grateful enough to share those blessings, grateful enough to be kind and generous and open-hearted.

I don't think that this is a story that says that you should give your last penny to the church, so if any of you were planning on doing that today, please don't. Holding up the widow as a model of stewardship fuels rather than defuses some of our craziness about money and that's too bad, because we're already crazy enough about money.

Does that mean that the example of the widow is worthless? I don't think so. I think it's interesting that among all the people with their fancy robes and large gifts, she is the person that Jesus notices. This seems to be the way with Jesus, that he notices people that no one else notices, instead of noticing the people that everyone does. People who can't walk, can't see, people that ordinary folks look away from. And those are the people he tells stories about – people who sit outside the gate, people who weren't invited to the banquet, people who weren't offered jobs. You'd think that that was part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, that you notice people who other people don't notice, people who are forgotten, left out, ignored, looked away from. And it's ironic, I suppose, that those people become famous for being ignored – the widow, the woman who spread ointment on Jesus' feet, the girl with the pearl earring. People become famous precisely because we don't know anything about them.

I thought about this as I thought about the experience of Safe Nights this past week. Probably because the weather has been unseasonably warm, we didn't have too many guests this week, and that's good news, because it means that our homeless guests weren't so cold that they were forced out of their tents and their other arrangements. We've also learned that some of the people we housed last year now have more permanent living arrangements and we can be grateful for that. But, for a week at least, our little community at Saint Nicholas was doing what we Christians ought to do all year – we were looking out for people that society in general doesn't want to see, wants to look away from, wants to ignore. Those are the people that followers of Jesus should be most attuned to seeing, as our Lord was.

A final thought. Maybe Jesus saw the widow because he was about to do what she had just done. He was about to give up everything for this flawed people who didn't really want to see him, who wanted to look away, who wanted not to be bothered, who

wanted to get on with their lives of prosperity and prayers, long robes and respect. The day that Jesus saw the widow was his last day of public ministry, his last day of teaching in the temple. After this he would be caught up in the Temple's justice, the justice of the Empire, just as the widow had been.

But in the process he formed a community that, when it is at its best, is devoted to seeing the people the world doesn't want to see, serving rather than being served by those people, giving to rather than taking from those people, knowing and recognizing them rather than forgetting and ignoring them. People who the Lord saw clearly.

Amen.