

“Love of Show or Show of Love”
Mark 12:38-44
November 8, 2015
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I was appalled this week. Appalled and upset. Researching on this passage, I read about an expose in a newspaper telling the story of a TV evangelist who wrote a letter to a widow in a nursing home asking for \$200. The article said,

His appeal was that if she did not have the money, she should borrow it and then send it to him. The letter was called to the attention of a reporter who [then] published it in the newspaper. The evangelist defended his action by claiming that God had instructed him to send this letter to the widow.ⁱ

What he didn't know was that this woman had died months before the letter was written.

Sadly, this is not new; people have been exploited in the name of religion for thousands of years. Jesus brings our attention to this in today's lectionary passage. And centuries later, it was this very kind of exploitation—the purchasing of indulgences—that helped prompt the Protestant Reformation. And although we'd like to think that our generation knows better, that we have learned from the examples of the past, unfortunately, we—as a people—have only become more careless, more brazen in what we tolerate in the name of religion.

You may have heard the recent story of a televangelist who asked his followers to donate money so he could buy a private jet (I won't say the name but the story was prominent in the news). That was shocking enough but I discovered this week that there are many other televangelists who have also asked for and received private jets. One televangelist can be seen on-line addressing his critics by brazenly telling them he'd made a second purchase of an even larger jet. He then admonishes his TV audience saying “be happy for me.”ⁱⁱ

Much of this has been in the news and on social media these last few months because John Oliver, a

comedian with a new show on HBO has taken on this issue as a personal campaign to expose the greed of many televangelists and their exploitation of the poor. Oliver starts by praising the overwhelming majority of churches and religious institutions that do good work in the world without blemish. And he'd be the first to admit, as a comedian, that the underlying reality of these extreme exceptions is not funny. Televangelists are seen encouraging those at home watching, especially the shut-ins in nursing homes or in long-term care facilities to stop saving money to pay down their credit cards or to pay for their healthcare. The TV preachers tell the sick and the poor to take that money and send it to their ministry instead, where it will be blessed, and come back to them tenfold. In one very public case, a woman is suing a well-known televangelist because her sickly mother stopped paying for her cancer treatments and, instead, sent her savings to his ministry which promised to be a better alternative to chemotherapy. Another televangelist is seen talking to those in his TV audience who are saving for a home. He says, "Maybe you have a \$1000 set aside. Well, that's not enough for a down payment, it's not even enough to get into an apartment (he laughs). Send that money to me, so I can bless it. Let it be seed money and your harvest will be plentiful." It was alarming to see clip after clip, televangelist after televangelist use the same tactics, the same formula, to get money from their audience.

And to be fair, it's not just religion: we have secular rackets that capitalize on the desperate, like payday loans; and these new for-profit colleges which—in some cases—are being found to exploit their students (who might otherwise have a hard time enrolling in traditional colleges) by making empty promises about their future while ensnaring the students with high-interest loans. Just this morning the New York Times had a piece on low-income home-owners in the city being defrauded out of their homes by a new shell-company scheme that entices them into believing that they are improving their financial circumstances while the fly-by-night schemers trick them into signing over the deeds on their homes.ⁱⁱⁱ

But today, this is about religion.

So what did this look like in the time of Jesus? Did people take advantage of faith for their own profit? It seems that's what Jesus is accusing the scribes of doing. But first, what exactly was a scribe? A scribe by definition was a writer but more than that, in this context, they were the scholars of their day, charged with the interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures. They were also essential to the operation of royal and imperial administrations. Scribes were responsible for much of the literature in the Hebrew Bible, many times as authors, and always as editors and copyists. It seems a noble profession, and in many cases, it was. In fact, scribes were the forerunners to modern day rabbis. And remember, just last week, we read that Jesus praised a scribe for his wisdom and understanding. But today, Jesus was addressing a corruption among many scribes. How some were interpreting the law to their own advantage, repackaging the law to benefit them and the temple, even if that meant interpreting the law to compel the poor to give what they can't afford.

Biblical scholars explain that this accusation of devouring widows' houses must be taken together with the riches of the Temple cult at this time. The temple was ostentatious, its officials, like the priests and the scribes, sought precious resources as offerings; they called for an abundance of animal sacrifices that otherwise might feed the poor. And the scribes wandered about expecting the best seats at the banquets while dressed in their long decadent robes. They not only pulled in copious amounts of money in the name of religion but they got it from those who could least afford it: the poor, the stranger, the widow.

Now this is an extreme example of selfishness and greed, not unlike the televangelists described earlier. So, it might be hard to see yourself as the scribe when we read this story today. You are generous, you don't devour widows' houses—neither would I—nor do I ever see myself wanting a private jet. That I am content to drive a 14 year old car should be enough to reassure me that I am not all that materialistic—right?

But then again, I do get the "*Love of Show*," It would be hard to find a preacher who didn't. I like

feeling good about this church, the beautiful white church on the square. And I am proud of who we are. Nothing wrong with that, right? What about you? Maybe you are also proud of certain things in your life and if you're not careful you—like me—could find yourself strutting about like the scribe in the temple, indulging in the love of the show. But this passage doesn't stop at the *Love of Show*; it goes deeper to show the means humanity will go to, the depths to which we will sink to get the best of the best, even if it means exploiting the poor through guilt, fear or empty promises.

Still, the wisdom of scripture challenges us to see that we have the capacity to behave like *any* of the people in this story, including the scribe. We are not perfect, we struggle with vanity and pride and yes, even greed. That's just part of being human and the sooner we can recognize this weakness, the easier time we'll have differentiating ourselves from the avarice, pride and duplicity of the scribe.

But maybe you saw yourself as the widow?

In Biblical times “widow” does not mean precisely the same thing as it does in modern society. The Hebrew word for widow, *almanah*, signified a woman who had not only lost her husband but who also had no other males who might support her socially and economically, such as her father, father-in-law, brother or an adult son of economic means. Maybe the other men were all dead, or maybe circumstances prevented them from caring for her. And maybe some just refused to take her in as the law would dictate. A woman with no man in her life found herself in a precarious position. We don't really know anything about this poor widow in the story today. She had lost her husband, but where is the rest of her family? Another question that occurred to me is: where did she get the money that she puts into the Temple treasury? Typically a woman in her situation would get money by begging, and if she has to beg, why does she put it into the treasury instead of keeping it? Of course the other way widows made money was through prostitution. Which raises more questions about her putting some of her earnings in the Temple treasury. If she *was* a prostitute, she'd be shunned publically, but typical of Jesus, she's the one that he points out as an example. So many times in his ministry he had been

questioned and condemned for consorting with sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes.

Well, we don't really know, do we?

It's hard for me to relate to this widow. I am a man. I have a home. I have people who care about me and who would take care of me. But I can imagine myself as a person with limited means, with little financial security...this is the stuff of anxiety that keeps many of us up at night...imagining the things that could go wrong. Can you? Can you imagine yourself without home or family or financial resources? What would you do? Can you relate to the widow whose faith is so great that she gives away what is tangible, right there in her hands, and walks away with nothing?

Though we are loath to see ourselves like the scribe and we may only see a little of ourselves as the widow, we relate to scripture because it tells the story of our humanity and yes—we can **all** play all the parts. Some characters reveal our human weaknesses, others portray our strengths. To admire the faith of the widow is to first accept the greed of the scribe. New Testament scholar Karoline Lewis says,

The Bible says, the Scriptures insist, and God needs that the characters we meet cannot simply be examples. They cannot be always those about whom we say, “Wow, I need to be more like” or “if I were more like...” They have to be invitations to embody how we will follow Jesus. They have to be those that allow us to imagine what the kingdom of God looks like. And that kingdom starts with whole life living.

Jesus commends the widow for her offering because she—out of her poverty—has put in everything she had, all she had to live on. Many translators will say that she put in her whole livelihood. The actual word in Greek is “bios.” She put in her whole *bios*, and yes, it can be translated as “living” or “livelihood,” but as many of you no doubt know, *bios* is the Greek word for “**life.**” She put in her whole life. **Her whole life.** Unlike the scribe, who *loves the show*, the widow gives out of a *show of love*. Last week we read that the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength. Love God with your whole self. Love God with your whole life. *Singing praises to my God all my life long*, as Ed read from the psalm.

The widow does that, and obviously this passage foreshadows what Jesus is about to do, give his life for us all.

The secret to understanding this passage is to first realize that it has **nothing to do with money**.

(So you can mentally put your checkbooks away.) It is unfortunate that those who organize the common lectionary used by so many protestant churches like us place this story in the midst of the stewardship campaign. This story is often used to encourage people to give more money by showing them the picture of this poor widow, look how much she gave in proportion to her income. She gave so she had nothing left over. Don't give what you won't miss, or what's comfortable, but instead give so it hurts like the widow and show it really matters to you. Sacrifice something for God. That's what we usually say, and I suppose I too have given a sermon very much like that in the past.

But somehow, this year, I saw it in a new way, from a new perspective and I asked myself, what if instead of thinking of ourselves as the widow or the scribe, **what if we thought of ourselves as the coins?** What if *we* are what is given to God. Not just our money, not just a few hours of volunteering a week, but all of who we are, our whole lives, from the moment we wake to the moment we sleep. That's what this passage really teaches us—it's a matter of biology, of *bios*, of our life. So in a way, this is not a stewardship text, it is not a story about how much money we should give to God or the church. **It is a discipleship text**, it is about giving our whole selves to God. What would it mean to give our whole selves to God? It means as the old Catechism says, that we belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not to ourselves, but to our faithful savior Jesus Christ. It means choosing to not find security in the *love of show* like the scribes and the televangelists but instead finding our security in the *show of love* we choose to share every day. The widow is blessed not because she gives all her money but because she gives **all her life**, because she gives it all in love, it's a show of love. And that's what we are called to do also.

- i <https://bible.org/article/they-devour-widows-houses>
- ii <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7y1xJAVZxXg>
- iii <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/nyregion/real-estate-shell-companies-scheme-to-defraud-owners-out-of-their-homes.html?smid=nytcore-iphone-share&smprod=nytcore-iphone>