

Mark 12:38-44
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38As 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, 39and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! 40They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

41He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 43Then 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. 44For 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.”

35 years ago, in 1986, on May the 24th in the First Presbyterian Church of Suffern, New York, at 10:30 in the morning, Erin and I said “I do,” and were united in marriage. We were surrounded by our family and our closest friends, and one of my friends from seminary, the Rev. Mark Ramsey was the officiant at our wedding. Since that day I have officiated myself at about 300 weddings and I always let the couple choose a scripture passage that has meaning to them to be part of the worship service. Many, many couples choose Paul’s words from I Corinthians, “love is patient, love is kind, love is not jealous or boastful, . . .” you know the passage. But Erin and I didn’t choose one, we let my friend Mark choose a passage for us. And Mark chose this one, the widow’s mite. This is an interesting passage to read at a wedding, don’t you think? A passage that is praising a widow and condemning the scribes. How does that make sense? What are we even to make of this passage today? Do we see ourselves in this passage? Do we relate to the scribes? Or maybe to the widow?

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. But in today's passage, Jesus was addressing a corruption among many scribes. How some were interpreting the law to their own advantage, repackaging the law to benefit themselves, 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 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 decorated robes signifying wealth. 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, we don't see ourselves as the scribe in this passage, do we? Ours is a generous congregation, and this is not an ostentatious church. We've always had people in our congregation that speak a prophetic voice when we might be going a bit overboard. I remember thirty years ago when we redid the interior of the sanctuary, we had a bit of a discussion over the lighting here in the sanctuary. We had one beloved member who thought these chandeliers were far too fancy for this simple church. We did some research and found that the old congregational church in Hudson, Ohio from where many of the settlers of this area had come, had lighting almost exactly like this, and that saved us from being show offs.

But then again, I do get the temptation to show off a bit. 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 attention.

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 could be old or young. 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 publicly, 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.¹

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.

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

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.

1 Lewis, Karoline. “Whole Life Living,” November 1, 2015. *WorkingPreacher.com*.

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. This is why our friend Mark chose this passage for our wedding. To encourage us to give our whole selves to each other, in love. 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. And that's what we are called to do also. To each other, and to Jesus.