

## Proper 27B 2015 Sermon

November 8, 2015

### *Mark 12:38-44*

*Teaching in the temple, Jesus 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."]*

Much of what I share with you today comes from Professor David Lose.\*

Sometimes our interpretation of a biblical passage turns on the questions that we bring to it. In the case of today's Gospel passage, I want to begin with one central question: *How do you hear Jesus' description of the poor widow's offering – is it praise or lament?* To put it another way: Is Jesus holding up the widow and her offering as an example of great faith and profound stewardship that he wants us to emulate, or is he expressing his remorse that she has given – perhaps feels compelled – to give away the little she has left?

I'll be honest, for most of my life, I've assumed it was the former – that Jesus is holding up the woman as an example of radical generosity, which we should emulate. But recently I've been persuaded that the other interpretation is more truthful to the text. Here's why:

1. This passage is part of a larger set of passages that focus on Jesus' confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees, and center on his critique of the Temple, which is the symbol of the whole power structure of the religious authorities. Indeed, ever since Jesus entered Jerusalem triumphantly (in Chapter 11), he has done little else except teach in the Temple and debate with the religious leadership there.
2. The first verses of this week's passage condemn the scribes precisely for "devouring widow's houses" – shorthand for pretty much everything they own. That supports the idea that the Temple laws quite likely **requiring** that the widow give this penny – despite the fact that it was all she owned – are uncompassionate and wrong. What kind of religious system demands a penny from a widow who only has one penny to her name?
3. In the passage immediately *after* this one, Jesus foretells the destruction of the Temple itself, seemingly the culmination of his attack on the religious establishment of Jerusalem.

4. Notably, there is actually no word of praise in Jesus' statement about the widow or any indication that Jesus is lifting her up as an example. All he does is describe what she is doing: "She, out of her poverty, has put in all she had to live on." Which makes how we imagine his tone of voice – praise or lament – so critical.

All of this leads me to conclude that Jesus isn't actually lifting this widow up as an example but rather decrying the circumstances that demand her to make such an offering, a sacrifice that will likely lead to destitution if not death – and I do not believe that Jesus is commending to everyone destitution and death. He is, rather, leveling a devastating critique against Temple practice and those who **allow**, let alone *encourage*, this woman to give "all she had to live on" (or, in a more literal translation of the Greek, *her whole life!*).

All of which leads me to a **second** question: Assuming Jesus' words are words of lament, what does that say to us today? That we should stand up for those who are most vulnerable? Yes. That we should stand against laws or customs that exploit the poor? Absolutely. That we should enact policies – and vote for politicians that advance such policies – that mirror God's intention to care always and foremost for "the least of these"? No question.

But changing laws to more closely align with Jesus' desires for those being exploited is still Law, not Gospel. And while Martin Luther rightly emphasized the importance of Law in instructing us how to take care of each other as God desires, he also said that the Law does not save. Only the Gospel saves, heals, **transforms** us and our community.

And what is the Gospel message – the Good News – in today's story? I think the good news of this passage comes in what it says about the God we worship, the God we confess Jesus reveals most clearly. Because this God *cares about this woman and her sacrifice*. This God sees her plight and recognizes her affliction. This God will not countenance such abuse – even and especially under the guise of religious piety – and so decries those who would order their world and religion to make such sacrifices necessary.

God **sees** her...and God cares about her. Trust me, I doubt anyone else, including the religious elite parading around the Temple that day and dropping in their token offerings, noticed this woman. And I doubt the disciples following Jesus would have noticed her either, had not their Lord lifted her up for their attention and sympathy. Which leads me to conclude that God also sees **our** struggles, recognizes **our** challenges, cares about where **we** are hard pressed.

But even more, I think that in this Gospel story God is inviting us to look around and **see each other**, those in our community we know and those we don't. And I mean really **see** each other – the pain of those who are discriminated against because of their ethnicity, the desolation of those who cannot find work and have

been abandoned to fend for themselves, the despair of those who have given up on finding work and have lost hope, and yes, our Canon City high school students who have fallen prey to our society's ubiquitous commercialization of sex – which we have allowed. God is inviting us to see them, to care for them, and to advocate for a system that does not leave anyone behind, but instead expresses the kingdom of God which Jesus says is at hand.

I believe that the good news in today's Gospel is that God sees our struggles and cares, and God believes in **us** enough to use us to make a difference – to bring forth the Kingdom of God in our midst by living our individual and communal lives in Christ's love and in the power of the Spirit. By being the Body of Christ in this world, being his Church.

So, go forth from this place today looking for those who have fallen through the cracks of the system, like the widow in our Gospel. They come into my office every week, and I can tell you that while yes, most of them are in need of money, what they need far more – what they hunger for – is to know that someone cares and will listen to them – someone who will see them. Go forth from this place today looking for where God is already at work and *join God's efforts* to see those in distress, help them find comfort and relief, and work for a more just and compassionate world.

God cares, and God invites us to care, too – invites us to use our time, talents, and treasure to bring forth the Kingdom of God in our personal lives, in this church family, and in the world. There is nothing our world more desperately needs.

AMEN

\* [http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/pentecost-24-b-surprisingly-good-news/?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A+DavidLose%2FIsqE+%28...In+the+Meantime%29](http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/pentecost-24-b-surprisingly-good-news/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+DavidLose%2FIsqE+%28...In+the+Meantime%29)