

Pentecost 25B (11/11/2018)

1 Kings 17:8-16

**Psalm 146**

Hebrews 9:24-28

**Mark 12:38-44**

*It's not enough to place the poor widows of the world on a pedestal and applaud them from a safe distance. Sacrifice is devastating for those who have little to give, and fundamentally unjust when powerful people thrive on the sacrifices of others. Jesus directs our attention to the most vulnerable people in our midst in order to join us to them. The invitation of the kingdom is to come alongside all who suffer, to be drawn together into loving sacrifice for each other's sake.*

You might think that the story of the widow's offering in our Gospel from Mark today would be ideal source material for a stewardship sermon. After all, next month we'll make pledges of financial support to Peace for the coming year, and what better illustration of faithful giving than the poor widow who offers her last two coins to the temple treasury? Whether large or small, a generous gift is any gift that involves real sacrifice for the sake of faith and love. So, as the classic interpretation goes, we should all aspire to the widow's example and give to the church accordingly... except that I don't want any of you to go hungry on account of your generosity. This raises the question of whether or not this is a story about stewardship after all. My answer is no, and yes.

There's a reason that today's Gospel reading includes the verses immediately prior to the story of the widow's offering. The scene at the temple treasury is inextricable from Jesus' corresponding critique of the scribes, a statement that epitomizes his teaching against self-serving religion:

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.

In other words, *Be cautioned against any system that preserves itself at the expense of vulnerable people. Such a system is rotten in God's sight.*

**Israel has a long prophetic tradition of defending the interests of the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, the poor – in short, all those whom society relegates to the margins.**<sup>1</sup> This tradition is reflected, for instance, in our Psalm for today:

Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help, whose hope is in the LORD their God... who gives justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger. The LORD sets the captive free. The LORD opens the eyes of the blind; the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down.... The LORD cares for the stranger; the LORD sustains the orphan and widow, but frustrates the way of the wicked.

Through this lens, Jesus' commentary about the poor widow's offering takes on a different meaning.

Notice that Jesus does not commend the widow for her generosity, but only points out her circumstances. All the others "have contributed out of their abundance," he remarks, "but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." A more literal translation of that phrase renders it "she out of her poverty has put in *her whole life*." As the widow leaves the treasury, in other words, she's ruined. She has even less than the widow in our

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<sup>1</sup> See Rodger Y. Nishioka, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4, 284.

first story from Kings who possesses at least a handful of meal and a little oil, just enough to prepare a small cake, that she and her son “may eat it, and die.”

**Is this what faithful stewardship requires, that the poor hand over the very last of what they have in order to prop up the religious institution? Or, is this an illustration of the very system against which Jesus teaches in the previous verses? Is the poor widow’s offering emblematic of a structure that benefits the elite at the expense of the powerless?**

The traditional interpretation – that the widow’s offering is to be celebrated as an example of faithful giving – is more comfortable. It’s easy to admire someone else’s sacrifice without allowing it to change us. We commend volunteers for their work on behalf of the community without rolling up our own sleeves. We salute soldiers for their service without confronting the price that war exacts from them. We praise working parents for their commitment to their children without asking why so many of them have to put in long hours for low pay just to make ends meet.

**But it’s not enough to place the poor widows of the world on a pedestal and applaud them from a safe distance.<sup>2</sup> Sacrifice is devastating for those who have little to give, and fundamentally unjust when powerful people thrive on the sacrifices of others. So, Jesus directs our attention to the most vulnerable people in our midst in order to join us to them. The invitation of**

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<sup>2</sup> See Emilie M. Townes, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4, 286.

**the kingdom is to come alongside all who suffer, to be drawn together into loving sacrifice for each other's sake.**

**Of course, Jesus himself embodies loving sacrifice. Like the poor widow, he hands over all that he has, his whole life, for the sake of the world he loves, a world that is filled with injustices. And, his sacrifice establishes the pattern for our own.** In this way, the story of the widow's offering is finally about stewardship – not only the stewardship of our individual resources to support the ministry of the church, but also the faithful management of our collective resources, blessings that God expects us to share equitably.<sup>3</sup> **Our community is richer, more complete when we uphold the interests of the least among us.<sup>4</sup> True solidarity with poor widows, however, carries a cost. Charity will win you awards, but standing alongside the oppressed, the hungry, and the captive is likely to get you crucified. Nevertheless, the promise of the gospel is that in dying to ourselves, we are raised to abundant life together.**

Kindred in Christ, if you are hurting, please reach out for help. And if you are blessed with more than you need, remember the poor. We're not meant to go it alone in this life, but to care for each other, to lift each other up when we're bowed down, and to live together in the hope of God's redemption.

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. Deuteronomy 15:4, 2 Corinthians 8:13-15.

<sup>4</sup> See Philippians 2:4-5.