

"The Widow's Gift"
Mark 12:38-44

Prayer: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Strength, and our Redeemer. Amen.

SERMON: A prominent pastor tells of a time when his church hired a fund-raiser to help with a large capital campaign. When the fund-raiser first met with the board, they warned him: "You have to understand that we are a church that has a high percentage of older people, mostly widows on fixed incomes. So we really can't expect to raise too much money." The fund-raiser asked to see a list of the major contributors and then went home to do his research. When he next met with the board, he told them that he had done an analysis of the congregation's giving. "You will note," he said, "that the majority of your contributors are 'widows on fixed incomes'. According to my calculations, these 'widows on fixed incomes' provide about 60 percent of this congregation's annual budget. My advice to you is this - if you want to improve the giving of this congregation, you need to talk to those women first, find out why they give, then try to infect the rest of the congregation with the faith of these 'widows on fixed incomes.'" The faith of an ancient 'widow on a fixed income' is *front and center* in this morning's Gospel lesson.

T. Denise Anderson writes to help us understand why the Bible talks so much about widows. She writes, "(Widows) were among the most vulnerable members of society. Theirs were the days . . . before there would be insurance payouts to cover the bills in the event of your spouse's death. The inheritance that might go to a surviving spouse today would normally go to the sons back then, and the widow would then be expected to go to live with her oldest son and his family and have them provide for her until she died. However, if she had no sons, or if her sons were too young to take on that responsibility, then she was at the mercy of society. While already sad, the death of one's husband created real threat and vulnerability for a widow. *This is why the Bible talks so much about them.*"

In the story known as "the Widow's Offering" Jesus stands in the outer court of the temple with his disciples watching the people deposit their offerings into the temple coffers that stood at the entrance to the inner temple. Watching people is an interesting pass-time, and here at the temple there were many interesting people to watch; the 'religious' professionals - the priests and scribes - in their long flowing robes and impressive garments, the wealthy citizens coming to deposit their large sums of money, assorted common folk with their modest offerings, and the devoted poor with their meager offerings. As Jesus stands and watches, a widow comes by and drops two small copper coins into the coffers. Her offering doesn't amount to much, financially speaking, but Jesus is impressed by the size of her gift. He calls his disciples over and says to them, '*. . . 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.*' No one seems to notice her act of generosity except Jesus. It is instructive to observe how Jesus notices the 'insignificant' people of the world: widows, children, lepers, the lame, the blind, the deaf,

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prostitutes, tax collectors; all regarded as 'lesser' people or 'outcast' people within that society. Jesus is drawn to these people, and is often moved by the depth of their faith.

Prof. William Dyrness observes, in a *Christian Century* article, that Jesus' 'comments seemed interesting, even amusing, until "I realized where I would be located in this ordinary scene and what Jesus would be saying about me. Let's face it, many of us reading this would be the folk wearing the clerical or academic robes, or other special clothes associated with class and power.'" In other words, *our gifts would be noticed by the temple authorities and words of gratitude would be murmured by the priests and scribes who looked after the temple. But Jesus doesn't want the praise of the priests and scribes. He is offended by their behavior and so he warns his disciples not to be swayed by their attention: 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, 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.'* What can he mean by this?

According to Dyrness, one of the scandals of Jesus' time had to do with the way the religious authorities catered to the needs of the wealthy while, in clear violation of their Law, neglected the needs of the poor, and especially the widows. Worse, there was evidence that these religious authorities were abusing their role as trustees for the estates of widows and unscrupulously drawing down their estates to pay the expenses of the temple. The combination of neglect and abuse was deeply offensive to Jesus, and yet - as he observes - the widows keep bringing their gifts. Their devotion to God is not swayed by their mistreatment at the hands of the temple authorities.

While Jesus is not very impressed by the important people dropping large gifts into the temple coffers, he is quite taken with the widow and her generosity. In his eyes, her two tiny copper coins are the most significant gifts to the temple that day. Jesus does not dismiss the gifts of the rich. He simply points out that these self-important donors are in reality small givers, while the poor insignificant widow turns out to be the greatest giver of them all."

A pastor writes of a time when, in his first parish, in the middle of a bad winter, the heating system failed. His small and struggling church had to make a difficult decision to either replace the heating system at a cost of \$10,000 or face closing the church. That Sunday the Stewardship Committee chairman addressed the congregation. "The way I figure it," he said, "if every family gives just \$100.00 more this year, only a couple of dollars extra a week, we can make our goal." The pastor's heart sunk for he knew that only about half of the families attending that church were able to contribute, and if only those people made the special \$100 contribution, they would never get their new heating system.

That evening he visited an elderly retired schoolteacher. "Did you hear Joel ask us all to give \$100.00 more this year?" she asked. "Yes," said the pastor, wondering what she would say next. "\$100 is a lot

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of money," she continued. "But I've prayed about it and God has shown me a way. I subscribe to the newspaper for \$40 a year. I also subscribe to *National Geographic*. I've called a friend who has consented to let me read her newspaper and borrow her *Geographic* after she has finished reading them. So it looks like I'll be able to give the money Joel asked for." "Her words," the pastor wrote, "filled me with shame. Here I was, bothered over what was to me a relatively small amount of money, but what was to her a great sacrifice. I gave from my abundance. She gave all she had."

BENEDICTION:

May God bless you and keep you.

May God's face shine upon you and be gracious to you.

May God look upon you with kindness and give you peace.

Let us go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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