

A Widow's Might Luke 20:45-21:4

Our passage today is often used for Generosity/stewardship sermons. Before you get too excited, know that I do not intend to preach another sermon for our Generosity campaign. This text is too rich to focus on only the widow's two copper coins, historically referred to as the widow's mite.

Prayer

Almighty God, speak your Word to us, and guide our feet, that we might be hearers and doers of your word. Amen.

A bit different from Luke's gospel, Mark's depiction of this passage opens with the added detail of Jesus teaching in the temple as the scribes, the teachers of the law, would have been seated in the most prestigious seats. The scribes were highly respected; in fact, one was to respect the scribe greater than one's own father, which is saying a lot in a patriarchal society. In the temple, the home-turf of the scribes, Jesus has the audacity to say, "Beware of the scribes." It was a provocative claim. It was worse than someone grabbing the microphone of Highmark Stadium and in the middle of a Bills game announce "Josh Allen is overrated." Jesus did not shy away from such statements, but only if they were true. You ever get the feeling Jesus didn't care much about making friends? "Beware of the scribes...They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers."

We have read about scribes, but have you ever tried to visualize them? All the scribes were male. If you are having difficulty picturing a scribe dressed in a long robe, seated in the best seat in the house of worship and being one who pray long

prayers... Well a scribe looked like Micah, and nothing like me. But what did it look like for a scribe to “devour widows’ houses”?

Commentators can only speculate. Possibilities include: Scribes could charge a widow excessive legal fees; because women could not own property the scribes could take advantage of an estate in which they were made trustees and take the widows’ homes as pledges for unpayable debts; perhaps even exploit the hospitality and trust of the widow. Even though it is uncertain exactly what “devour widows’ houses” means, it is clear that the scribes were in some way taking financial advantage of vulnerable and needy widows. Not all, but some scribes preyed upon needy widows and clothed their behavior with a religious appearance. Ironically the temple was mandated to care for the widow, to not even accept funds from those widows in poverty. The scribes Jesus speaks of are coordinating the opposite, not caring for the widow, but taking advantage of the widow. In the midst of the temple Jesus said, “Beware of the scribes for they will receive the greater condemnation.”

I imagine it being a pretty quiet temple when Jesus took his seat. Those who were gathered were astonished, not by what he said – they already knew that. They were astonished because he actually said it; he called out those who were abusing their power. The truth Jesus spoke had been, until that point, an unspoken truth. As the service continued, Jesus watched as the worshippers got up and began placing their offerings in the treasury, which was thirteen large chests where the gatherers could place their monetary or tangible offerings. Jesus watched as rich people put their gifts into the chests. Then, amidst all the movement Jesus noticed a widow. Perhaps she was slow moving, maybe it took her longer than it should have pull out her two mites, which were the least valuable of all coins. Regardless,

for some reason, Jesus noticed her as she placed her two coins in the treasury. And the widow's actions moved Jesus. He was impacted by her giving.

Think about it, Jesus had just railed against the scribes, exposed them for taking advantage of the treasury, condemned them greatly for taking advantage of widows, and knowing this, the widow gave anyway. The widow surely suspected she was being taken advantage of, that she was giving to the temple from which, according to their own laws, she should have been receiving. Jesus had just confirmed her suspicion that the treasury was mismanaged as she stood listening. She knew the truth, it was her home that had been devoured, yet with all her might she approached the treasury and placed within the temple her two copper coins, apparently her only two coins. "Out of her poverty she gave everything she had," Jesus said. Out of her poverty, she gave. She was all in. She who would have been justified to make demands upon the temple, placed in the temple according to Luke's words, she gave "all she had to live on." In her Women's Lectionary, Ashley Wilcox highlights a literal translation from the Greek, the widow placed in the temple "the whole of her life." This is why Jesus was moved.

Veterans Day was earlier this week. A day set aside to honor those who have placed their lives on the line to protect and preserve the lives of others. Veterans Day is a day which reminds us too many parents have said a last goodbye to their sons and daughters. Wars in which too many widows were made. Wars in which millions perished giving 'the whole of their lives' toward an idea bigger than any one of them. The plaque near our baptismal font honors Westminster's one hundred twenty-eight women and men who served in World War I. In that war, no souls were braver than our military's 92nd combat division, not from our city but given the nickname, "Buffalo Soldiers." The members of this division were likely

from our country's earliest generation of African Americans born into freedom, whose parents, grandparents and further generations were victims of the great sin of slavery. Sons of slaves, victims of segregation, unspeakable harassment, lynching, Jim Crow laws embraced by their government, yet they volunteered their services and set off to fight for the country which enslaved their families. History tells us these young men viewed the conflict as an opportunity to prove their loyalty, their patriotism and their worthiness for equal treatment in the United States. Like the widow in our text, they offered the whole of their lives for something greater than themselves, while knowing that very something was taking full advantage of them. But let us not be fooled, the members of the 92nd division did not give their lives to our country for what it was, and I like to think those listed on our plaque did not either. They gave their lives to our country for what it should be, for what it had promised to be, for what it was created to be.

Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, watching people place their offerings and he noticed the widow. This widow knew full well that she had been taken advantage of. Regardless, she attended the temple service, and this mighty widow gave the whole of her life to what was broken, corrupt and also condemned. Yet she offered the whole of her life placing her only two coins in the treasury, again, not for what the temple was, but for what it should be, for what it promised to be, for what it was created to be.

Giving the whole of one's life for that which is knowingly broken, perhaps corrupt and condemned. In this way, the widow is much like Christ. This is the work of Christ, who redeems, who offers the whole of his life to all people. Who gave his life, who now lives through his church. Trusting his followers to give through his church not only for what it now is, but for what the church should be, for what it

promises to be, for what it was created to be. The widow entrusted all she had to the temple. Jesus entrusts all he has to the church. To what do we give the whole of our life?

Like those who gave their lives to protect our nation's constitution, we have a constitution to protect. The following are words from the Presbyterian Church USA constitution: "We commit to be a church who promises to participate in God's activity in the world through our life for others by:

"Healing and reconciling and binding up wounds...ministering to the needs of the poor, the sick, the lonely, and the powerless...engaging in the struggle to free people from sin, fear, oppression, hunger and injustice... giving ourselves and our very substance to the service of those who suffer...sharing with Christ in the establishing of his just, peaceable, and loving rule in the world." Our constitution goes on to say, "The church is called to undertake this mission even at the risk of losing its life."

For this mission we as a church give the whole of our life. It is for these we place our mite (might).

In the name of the one who Creates, who Redeems and who Sustains. Amen.