

Mark 12:38-44
Year B Proper 27 – 25th Sunday after Pentecost

The Destitute Widow and the Destruction of the Temple

Based heavily (and quoting some passages) from commentary by Sung Soo Hong, www.workingpreacher.org.

Today's passage from Mark's gospel tells a story—one familiar to many—of the widow who comes to the temple and gives all that she has, a pittance, in contrast to the wealthy who are giving from their abundance. In this understanding the widow is the “model of discipleship”, in contrast to the scribes who are the opposite. A broader reading in Mark's gospel seems to support this idea.

For example, earlier in Mark Jesus instructs his disciples to “deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (8:34-38); and remember Jesus' instruction to the rich man in chapter 10 to “sell what you own and give the money to the poor”. The widow in our story is offering her whole life (12:44), thus keeping what Jesus told as the greatest commandment to “love the Eternal, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength” (12:30). This, what I'll call the “popular interpretation”, is well-supported by this reading of the text. And given when this reading falls during our lectionary cycle: that is, during the church's stewardship season, it *seems* to clearly say “certainly *you* can be a little more generous in your pledge for next year, can't you?” And while these may be comfortable and apparently obvious interpretations, they are also profound misunderstandings of Jesus' teaching on discipleship.

Social location and details are important here. How can we compare the situation of a rich man, being asked to sell his possessions *for the poor*, to that of a destitute widow, giving the last of the money she has to live on *to the temple*? Can you imagine Jesus urging the destitute to give what little they have to God? Have you ever read (or heard) anything in the Hebrew Bible that demands *everything* from the poor?

You might be asking yourself “what about the disciples? Didn't they leave everything behind?” Yes, indeed. Andrew, James, John, and Peter had their own boats and nets. Andrew and Peter had a house. Peter was married and had a wife and a mother-in-law. They *chose* to leave what they had, which was considerable, to follow Jesus.

In contrast, the widow's two small copper coins (so small and worthless they could not bear the imprint of the emperor's face). She gave away *all she had* (the Greek here is *bios*, where we get the word “biology”, her life), *which was worth nothing*. She is a widow, and in the social context of Jesus' time she would be dependent on whatever her husband left to provide for her, or an adult son, or a father to provide for her, or if she had remarried, or perhaps had other family. The widow in our story had none of these: house, husband, son, father, brothers, sisters, or fields. She was not only poor, but the system had also utterly failed her.

Does the Jesus that you know and follow ask the destitute to give everything they have to serve God? No, Jesus comforts and blesses them. He condemns the rich, the comfortable, the powerful, especially those that exploit the poor.

Looking back at Mark's gospel, Jesus' opinion of the scribes is clear. He says:

“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces ³⁹ and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰ They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

This graphic language in turn recalls Ezekiel (34:2-3):

Woe, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³ You eat the fat; you clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatted calves, but you do not feed the sheep.

If the leaders had kept the Law—for example, Deuteronomy 24:19-20:

When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. ²⁰ When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow.

—if they had feared God, who is often portrayed as the ultimate defender of widows in the Hebrew Bible, the widow in our story would not have become destitute.

It helps if we zoom out a little bit in Mark's gospel, I think, as sometimes the lectionary cycle can cause us to be a bit myopic around one particular set of readings for the week, without understanding its context. This whole section--from the cursing of the fig tree in chapter 11 (for not bearing fruit) to Jesus' declaration of the destruction of the temple in chapter 13--this section dwells on the themes of the religious leaders challenges of Jesus, his criticisms of their failures, and the destruction of the temple. Therefore, it makes sense to understand the story of the widow here in that context.

This last scene at the temple (that is, the widow) can read as recalling the first scene, the cleansing of the temple. In Mark 11:17 Jesus quotes Jeremiah 7:11,

‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’?
But you have made it a den of robbers.”

which is part of Jeremiah's temple sermon. Earlier in that same sermon Jeremiah says:

For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, ⁶ if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow or shed innocent blood in this place, [...], ⁷ then I will dwell with you^[a] in this place, in the land that I gave to your ancestors forever and ever.

However, Jeremiah, says:

I, too, am watching, says the Lord. ¹² Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel. ¹³ And now, because you have done all these things [that is, oppress the alien, the orphan, the widow, among many sins], says the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, ¹⁴ therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors just what I did to Shiloh.

The Gospel of Mark is building a case, as it were, and all of this leads to asking the following question here: When does the temple of God lose its reason to exist? Is it when merchants do business in the temple? Is it when the religious leaders challenge the authority of the Son of Man in the temple? Is it when they seek to trap the Messiah politically? Is it when they fail to understand the Scriptures? Is it when they make a show of religiosity, saying long prayers merely for the sake of appearance?

Let's set the scene again. Here's I'm quoting from Sung Soo Hong excellent commentary on today's reading because it is so good.

Jesus was sitting down at the Court of the Women in the temple, looking at the "exceedingly beautiful and lofty columns" there. He turned his eyes to the temple treasury, knowing that the temple had already accumulated immense wealth. He saw "many rich people" (12:41) offer large sums of money. Perhaps it was when a widow put in her last coins—everything she had to live on, which was nothing--that the temple hit the very rock bottom.

The presence of one destitute widow questions the reason for the temple's existence. As always in Mark, the disciples (and perhaps by extension, we ourselves) fail to understand: one of them said, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" (13:1). While the disciples were amazed at the splendid appearance of Herod's temple, Jesus saw no reason for the temple to exist anymore—not even a stone upon a stone. (Hong)

We do not know what happens to the widow in Mark's story. Did she disappear into the crowd, never to be seen again. Did Jesus instruct his keeper of the purse, Judas Iscariot, to give her something so she could eat that day? Or better yet, did she become a follower of Jesus, joining with the other women who journeyed with Jesus from Galilee to the cross and beyond?

Whatever happened to the woman after that day, while her story can be one of utter faithfulness and trust in God, it is also a reminder, and a warning. It is a reminder that God's ultimate concern is for human welfare and for the providence of the most vulnerable and needy among us, and that our concern should be, and must be also.

And it is a warning that when we fail to do so, the very purpose and reason for our religious institutions to exist comes into question, and that God, to whom "all hearts are open and all desires are known", is paying attention.

So, what does this mean for us today?

Given God's "preferential option for the poor", as the Jesuit teaching says it--and I would extend this to all who are on the margins of society and lack basic necessities of food, shelter, healthcare, and protection--where do we place our emphasis? Do we look out only for ourselves and our own comfort, or do we use our resources and the resources of this community to always widen the circle of inclusion and hospitality? How can we be better stewards of the abundance we have to share with those in need? Do we recognize those needs? Do we understand how to respond? Do we listen for and make space for God? Do we welcome Jesus in the stranger, in the "least of these" among us? Do we do this in our parish? In our deanery? In our diocese? In the wider church?

And similarly to our church context (our own "recycled temple"), we can ask these same questions of our civic institutions. How do our local, regional, state, and federal governments provide for the needs of those most in need? How do we influence policy—through our vote, advocacy, organizing, education, outreach, and protest, if need be—to ensure these bodies and the policies they create and enact provide for *all* persons in our communities, and not just those that look, speak, pray, and behave like us?

The outcome of the election was not what many of us hoped, prayed, and worked for, and the policy plans of the incoming administration are extremely concerning to many. But our work remains unchanged: to love and trust God, to love one another, and, in the words of our baptismal covenant, "to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves." For we "come to the Table for not only for solace, but for strength also; and not for pardon only, but renewal."

May it always be so.