

The Poor Widow: A Reflection on Religious Exploitation

Stewardship Commitment Sunday

Mark 12:38-44
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Each fall when the temperature starts to drop, and the leaves start to change color and drop from the trees, you can be sure of one thing: a Presbyterian church near you is in the midst of their annual Stewardship Campaign. It's the annual rite of passage before the season of Advent, and before finalizing a budget for the coming year.

It's so important to remember, however, that **biblical stewardship isn't about fundraising, but rather a spiritual discipline that becomes a lifestyle. It's a recognition that good stewardship is as much about our need to give as it is about the church's need to receive.**

One of the scripture passages that comes up every three years on the lectionary church calendar during stewardship season is today's Gospel lesson from Mark 12. You are probably familiar with this biblical story that is often called "The Widow's Mite."

Traditionally (and I emphasize 'traditionally'), the church has used this story of the destitute widow as the ideal symbol for Christian generosity, wholehearted discipleship, good stewardship and total commitment. Traditional sermons on this text often tend to overlook the rich people mentioned in the story who only gave out of their excess, and to downplay the behavior of the scribes. Why? Because stewardship season is not a time to offend church members, especially the wealthier ones whose quantitatively larger financial gifts are needed to raise the funds to support the church budget. (Upon reflection, maybe that's not such a bad approach...)

This story, therefore, is most often interpreted as a sentimental tale of sacrificial giving, giving your all to God. One source I looked at this week interpreted the story in the typically traditional way. The preacher writes:

What makes the widow's gift valuable and important is not its size but the heart and the sacrifice behind it. In the eyes of the passers-by, the widow's offering is virtually worthless but in the sight of God it is most precious. After throwing her last two coins in the box, she is able to say, 'This is the best I can do for it's all that I have got.' What wins her the Lord's favour and earns his commendation, is the fact that she kept nothing back for herself. Her small gift is her all. In a way she is making an offering of her total life to God. This gospel story invites us to live in a way that hurts and does not count the cost, for it is in giving that we receive.

[Knowles, Desmond, *Voicing a Thought on Sunday: Homilies and Prayers for the Faithful for the Three-Year Cycle*, The Columbia Press/Twenty-Third Publications, 1991, p.248]

Well, I'm glad that College Hill is not a traditional congregation and that I have become a fairly non-traditional preacher. Because when I now hear this story interpreted in this way it makes me cringe. I even find it theologically and socially offensive. Why? Because the only way to interpret this story in such a manner is through a complete disregard for its historical context. One would have to ignore the social, political, and religious dimensions of the text, as well as its place in the gospel of Mark, to turn it into a sentimental tale of good stewardship. So let's look at its context.

According to Mark, watching the destitute widow throw in her *last* two coins into the Temple treasury comes at the very end of Jesus' public ministry during the last week of his life. Jesus had overturned the tables of the money changers in the Temple courtyard a few days earlier. **The gospel writer has already made it clear that Jesus thought much of the religious Temple system to be corrupt.**

Added to that, the most important element needed to help interpret the story of the widow is what immediately proceeds it. That is why it was included in today's reading. Jesus says, "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" (vs. 38-40).

Who were the scribes? Scribes were scholars, lawyers, and interpreters of the Hebrew law – the Torah, part of what we call the Old Testament law. Jesus doesn't criticize all scribes, just the ones who were putting themselves on public display; the ones who were pretentious and demanded places honor and prestige; the ones who put up a pretense of piety, all the while draining the resources of widows, who were already near the bottom rung of the social ladder.

Interestingly, according to the law these experts in the law were not allowed to be paid for their services. Instead, they were dependent on the gifts of patrons for their livelihood. Such a system, as you might imagine, was vulnerable and prone to abuses. Widows, especially wealthy ones, were preyed on by the greedy and unscrupulous among these scribes.

Jesus particularly condemns the hypocrisy of their long prayers that were used to mask their greed; their religious practices used as a pretext for injustice; using religion for personal gain.

How does any of this relate to us today? It immediately reminded me of certain TV evangelists and faith healers who take advantage of and prey on the poor, elderly and sick, and yes, even the superstitious, asking them to send in their money in return for answers to their prayers. Folks, this is among the worst forms of religious abuse.

It is with all this in mind that Mark next tells the story of the widow's offering, therefore continuing the theme of the exploitation of widowed women. Yet unlike traditional interpretations, modern progressive biblical scholars are asking new and different questions of this biblical passage.

For instance, the text does not explicitly praise the widow's actions, but merely comments on the size of her offering and sacrifice. Rather, she serves as a concrete example of how innocent people are victimized by the Temple authorities. How? Many believe today that Jesus' comments about the widow are really meant to be a sad

lament about her predicament, and continue the denunciation of the scribes, who instead of caring for this woman as the law directed them to do are part of a system that is robbing her of her last pennies.

In fact, there is much evidence to suggest that **Jesus wasn't teaching about 'giving until it hurts' at all, but is rather attacking both the scribes and the religious Temple system that compelled this woman to offer her last tiny coins, as though God would demand such total financial sacrifices of the poor of the world.** Let me reiterate this last point. Do you believe in a God that would require you to give up 'all that you own, and all that you have to live on?' I don't. For that's a legalistic god, not a God of grace and compassion.

So perhaps this story, in its context, asks us to see these scribes not just as bad examples, but also **as part of a bad system - a religious system, no less, that abuses and exploits the poor for its own gain. A religious system that's more concerned with its own institutional maintenance than it is on ministering to those in need.** The woman who Jesus observes, far from being a sentimental example of faithful stewardship, is an unwitting pawn of an abusive system demanding her obedience.

So, it is in this context this morning that I remind you that **today is Stewardship Commitment Sunday, the day we ask you to give of your time, talents and finances to this religious system.**

Perhaps today's gospel lesson, then, should be seen as a warning to the church to see if our religious systems have been infiltrated by any injustice and exploitation of others. We are asked to evaluate whether our piety is genuine, or just a big show of hypocritical appearances. In other words, unlike the scribes, do our actions really match our words?

For yes, there was much in the old religious system in Jerusalem that Jesus condemned. This threat to the status quo was most likely the *primary* reason the religious authorities sought his death. I wonder what Jesus would have to say about the Christian religious system of today. **For if Christianity is in any way guilty of injustice, oppression, or exploitation (which I personally think it sometimes is), then perhaps Jesus' condemnation applies to us as well.**

I'm here this morning, therefore, not to tell you to give until it hurts, but rather to thank you for the contributions of your time, abilities and yes your financial resources that are used (hopefully in a faithful manner and with integrity) to help support the work and ministry of this congregation and denomination.

And I ask that together we look long and hard, with a discerning eye, at what we do and say as a congregation, so that we may try to right any abuses and injustice we discover in our religious system - as Christians, as Presbyterians, and as members of College Hill Presbyterian Church.

Amen.