

I Kings 17:8-16
Psalm 146
Hebrews 9:24-28
Mark 12:38-44

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The Widow's Might

Does anyone other than me find it very interesting that this story comes at the height of our annual giving campaign? You might imagine that this story comes as a great delight to most preachers in stewardship season! Here is a story of absolutely profound sacrificial giving, a story of absolutely everyone being able to participate, a story of giving that is not measured by how much one has, but by one's willingness to sacrifice and to give from a sense of abundance rather than withhold from a sense of poverty and scarcity. It seems perfect. But it isn't.

It's not perfect because there is something very wrong with a system that takes every last penny from the poor and rewards the rich. It's not perfect because it puts that impoverished widow on a pedestal, far removed from us and from our daily lives, and if we're not careful, we will idolize her for her sacrificial giving and do nothing to change a world that has impoverished her and so many like her. It's not perfect because we may think it says rich people who give a lot are not to be recognized and thanked for what they give, instead they are to be criticized and ridiculed for not doing more. It's not perfect because if we are not very careful, we will find ourselves sitting in judgement – judging the widow, judging the wealthy, judging the scribes, judging ourselves.

So while it may not be the perfect stewardship story on its surface, it is a profoundly important story that has much to teach us about sacrificial giving, in this or any other season. This widow who put two teeny tiny coins into the temple treasury, is the one Jesus has his eye on and the one he invites us to watch too. But I don't think he wants us watching her because she put all of the money she had into the church coffers. I think he wants us to watch her because this woman refused to be forced out of her temple, whether or not it was corrupt. I think he wants us to watch her because this woman knew she had a rightful place in the company of all of God's beloved, regardless of her gender, her age, her social status or her economic circumstances. I think he wants us to watch her because in her dignity, this woman gave all that she had – oh I don't mean money in the form of those last two tiny coins. I think it's because she really did have much to give... Jesus said she gave all that she had. And if we look carefully at that translation, we're told she gave not just her livelihood, but her very life.

I think that is what Jesus is inviting us to look at. I think he's asking us to see, really see in that widow, the devotion, beauty, dignity, belonging and belovedness of everyone, especially the ones we're least likely to notice. I think he's asking us to see that we have as much to learn from the least likely people as we do from the ones we imagine are important.

We need to remember that when Jesus said these things, he wasn't living in a culture that was kind of spiritual but not religious. He was in the temple in Jerusalem, the holiest place in Israel

and he was speaking into a community of rigorously religious people whose religious practices were very public. This was a community where piety and religiosity were highly esteemed, a community where people did not pledge anonymously, but instead poured buckets of coins into containers that intensified and reverberated the sound of every single coin for God and everyone else to see and hear. Can you imagine it? I know some of you are really cringing right now. But that's what conspicuous consumption looked like in Jesus' day.

In his day, the way people gauged one's importance was the force of the trumpet blast announcing the excessive amounts of money dropped into the church coffers – so different from the houses, cars, clothes, travel and other supremely secular things that for some in our time, constitute their worth. But showing off is showing off, regardless of what form it takes or what century it happens in, and Jesus wasn't – and isn't – having any part of it. And so in the midst of the coins crashing into the coffers and the sounds of the trumpet blasts, Jesus says: *Look. Look over here. See that woman? Watch her. See her. See her circumstances, see her dignity, see her utter unselfconsciousness, see her devotion to God. See her offering. See her.*

This seemingly poor woman who gave her everything to God was giving back what God had given her at the very deepest level. In offering the last of the money she had, she gave over any sense of scarcity and all sense of control over her resources. She gave herself to God. I don't imagine it was the first time. It is surprising how people who have little in the way of material things are so profoundly generous with whatever they do have. To the ones who have and worry about having enough, this seems odd, even sacrificial. But this is the nature of generous Spirits.

The real meaning of sacrifice is the offering of something deeply valued as an act of worship to God. The real meaning of sacrifice is to make sacred. It isn't what we typically think of when we hear the word sacrifice. For those of us who have plenty, sacrifice often implies giving up more than we think we ought to. But this unnamed widow, the poorest of the poor and the lowliest of the lowly in her world, would not be dissuaded from offering her gift. Her tiny coins made hardly a sound when they dropped into the coffers, and still, those tiny coins were unquestionably sacred. Her tiny coins were a sacrificial offering... an offering of herself, her faith, her dignity, her belovedness, all made sacred by the God who loved her. Her tiny coins symbolized so much more than money. Those coins symbolized her faith and her recognition that her faith had to be lived out in ways that are tangible, even incarnational. Her giving was neither rote or ritualistic, for that would have meant it was no longer sacred. Her giving was pondered and prayed over, and that sort of giving will transform our lives. As it turns out, when we give sacrificially, we are always, always changed.

I have had this experience and I know this is true. I once sat on a board of non-profit foundation that was developed to complete a particular task. Having completed the work, it was time for the organization to disband, and we had the happy circumstance of being left with lots and lots of money. It was decided that each board member would take responsibility for donating something close to \$10,000 to the non-profit of their choosing. This was a time in my life when I

would never have conceived of donating \$1,000 to anything, let alone \$10,000. It felt like a huge responsibility. It felt like an onerous task. I set aside for a long time. Until I didn't. There came a point when I realized what a profound privilege it was to be able to give SO MUCH money away! I chose the Marfan Foundation because my little son's best friend had Marfan's Syndrome, and writing that check was more joy filled and thrilling than I could ever have imagined. It didn't matter that it wasn't my money, it really didn't. I don't say that to be flippant, I say that with more gratitude than you can possibly imagine. That money was put into my care and I got to give it away. And in time I came to understand that to be true of all the money that passes through my hands. None of it is mine. It all belongs to God. And every penny I have given since that time represents the faith filled offering of all that God has given me and all the ways I hope to be a part of God's goodness in the world. As it turns out, each time our giving is sacrificial, made sacred in the act of devotion to God, we help to usher in God's kingdom.

"Truly I tell you, 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." This was not Jesus' indictment of the rich or his glamorization of the poor. It was his way of teaching us that not the size of the offering, but it's sacrificial nature that matters.

So, it turns out maybe this story isn't such a gift to preachers in the stewardship season. I mean, if what Jesus is saying is that 2 cents is worth more than bazillions of dollars, I'm guessing the stewardship committee might be squirming in their seats right now. But that isn't the point and we all know it. Jesus is inviting us into the unspeakable joy of sacrificial giving, whatever that is for each one of us. Not just in the annual campaign, but in the whole of our lives. Because when we offer ourselves, our souls and bodies, our very lives in devotion to God, God does indeed make all of it holy. I am so grateful that God turns our gifts – whether they be the offerings of our lives and labor or the offering of bread and wine – into holy things. And so grateful that God is making all of us holy too. Amen