

## **If Not Us, Then Who?**

**Mark 12:38-44**

**Northminster Presbyterian Church**

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Behold...the last public act of Jesus ministry in the Gospel of Matthew. After this exchange in the temple, he has a few things to say to the disciples about the temple's destruction and then one final lesson for them...and from then on it is arrest, trial, execution.

Why is this text the last thing Mark's tradition remembers before it all goes crazy? What is it about this attack on the Scribes? What is it about this woman?

The folks who put the lectionary together two generations ago seemed to have an idea...because they put this text right in the heart of what has typically been stewardship season in most churches...and so this woman, this widow... has been trotted out for stewardship sermons probably as long as any church has needed to make a budget. Every three years she shows up in early November and we rehearse her act of giving...and then some overly well-fed pastor type in long-sleeved robes—I guess that would be me...is supposed to encourage people who have more than two pennies to rub together to give generously...It has been called the story of the widow's mite. M-I-T-E.

But she's not the only widow on display today. For here we again have Ruth and Naomi—as we learned last week, the dynamic duo of Biblical Widows. For how long have they been the symbols of the weak widow...the ones who must be looked after and taken care of by Boaz, by some man? And especially Ruth...this widow who is a stranger in a strange land...who is seeking to care for her mother-in-law and herself, who is dependent on the kindness of strangers...on the wheat they leave in the fields for those who must scavenge to stay alive...How long has Ruth, the great-great-great-great ...add on a whole lot more greats grandmother of Jesus...how long has she been portrayed as the humble child who followed her mother-in-law's instructions to find security in a man?

How long have we seen these three women as mostly powerless?

Increasingly, it seems, we must come to terms with the possibility that we've missed the point in these stories...that in our male-centered, male-dominated theologies, and yes, even our sometimes misogynist lectionary, we've lost sight of what is really happening.

Did you notice the context in which Jesus places his comments about the widow who leaves two pennies, the only money she has? It is in the context of condemning the scribes—the lawyer theologians who run the temple—for making her a poor widow in the first place....“Beware of the preachers who parade around in their flashy clothes and show up at all the important political rallies” Jesus seems to be saying...“for they have made life more miserable for the poor...for the widows.”

Jesus isn't lifting this nameless widow up as a paragon of virtue...Though by highlighting her he does show her piety and devotion...Nevertheless, he is identifying with her as a victim of a system that has failed...of society's failure...of the religious community's failure... All the way back in Exodus, God's law declared that you shall not abuse any widow or orphan. Moses proclaimed: cursed be anyone who deprives the widow of justice. The pleading of the prophets -- Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah – all reveal widows shamefully oppressed by the church and its leaders. Despite the laws of God, widows are so oppressed that all of those prophets plus Malachi declare specifically that the God of Israel is the protector of widows and that the society that does not look after its widows is a failure in the eyes of God.

As we've said, widows were powerless because they had no legal or financial protection...no husband, no sons...those who were permitted to have power...to protect them. They had no voice, no rights apart from their husbands and their husbands' families.

And so this widow, offering all that she has...literally in the Greek “her whole life”...is not an example Jesus praises. Rather, she represents a situation Jesus deplores.

Giving to the temple wasn't exactly voluntary in those days...there were social and religious expectations. And meeting religious obligations set down by temple leadership was easy for the rich—they could afford it. But for the poor, like this woman, the burden is crushing. As Rodger Nishioka of Columbia Seminary puts it, it's not that Jesus doesn't admire what she is doing, but that is not his point. Instead, he's angry on her behalf. The system...the temple, the church...is taking everything from her...and to Jesus...that is deplorable. It gets him about as mad as he ever gets in Mark's Gospel.

Let's be clear. Why is Jesus so angry? Because the temple...the center of religious life...the place that is supposed to be the home of freedom...the place

that is called to be a manifestation of God's grace and love and power and hope...has instead become a place of oppression and exploitation.

This is indeed a text about Stewardship...but I want to suggest -- not in the way we traditionally thought it was...It's not celebrating giving till it hurts, though there are other texts in scripture that do....instead it's about reminding the church what its job is...it's about reminding me and you and the session, and the Presbytery and the General Assembly...It's about demanding that we all take a long hard look and ask...what are we about? Are we about building ourselves up, making ourselves feel good, or are we about lifting up the least among us...about bringing Good News to the poor and preparing ourselves and our legacies...like little Luke and Emma to be bearers of that Good News...are we a gift of God for the people of God...or are we merely creating a place that is a gift to us?

For it's not just about proclaiming the saving love of Jesus Christ...but about the essential call at the heart of that saving love. We are not transformed by the Grace of God just so we might be freed from our own captivity to our past and our failings...but so that we might heed the call to demonstrate a way of living that proclaims the divine imprint in every one of God's children...that asks those who are in need what they need and then responds by providing it...It's about honoring those who are poor, oppressed, lonely, wanting, waiting...by listening to them...by being with them...by befriending them in the name of Christ...by working with them to change their world...and so the whole world...

If the church isn't about that, Jesus seems to be warning us today, then every pledge we dedicated last Sunday...every dollar we collect every Sunday, is again robbing the widow of her final two pennies.

I almost called today's sermon The widow's might...not the M-I-T-E -the word used to describe the pittance she gave., but the widow's might...M-I-G-H-T...might as in power...might as in possibility...might as in strength...

The might of the widow in Mark's gospel is that she is our teacher...she is the one teaching us and those pompous pastors Jesus condemns in today's text how to be church —not just how to be good stewards of money---but how much more fundamentally to be a place where the Spirit of God is alive and vibrant...And so we look to her not because we should give as she does, but because she is the reason we give...Yes we give in gratitude...but we also give because there are needs...our needs to be sure, but also the desperate needs of the world...

And let's not forget Ruth and Naomi while we are letting widows teach us today...What do they do in today's text that's relevant here? They make a new life

for themselves...Naomi uses her knowledge, her cunning, her understanding of human nature...to bring together Ruth and Boaz...to make a new family...for them and for her...to make a new family from which as we noted last week, shall spring King David...and eventually Jesus Christ. These widows have might too...because they remind us...that the oppressive systems...the failure to follow God's law and care for the widows...does not mean that the oppressed and exploited are necessarily completely powerless, hopelessly desperate unless we go save them...it reminds us that our call is to join them...not fix them...to join them in their journeys and struggles...for like Naomi...many know their situation better than any other...and many are already at work seeking to make a new way for themselves...And they don't need us to ride in like the cavalry in a movie...most don't even ask us to fix the situation...Rather, they invite us to join them...to work with them...to learn from them...and together, with God, to make a new world for us all...

So they...the powerless widows of the Bible who it turns out aren't so powerless after all...they ask us...Who are the "widows" today? With Social Security, pensions, financial planning and life insurance, most of the widows who call our church home aren't dependent on the kindness of strangers the way Ruth and Naomi were...And heaven knows they aren't powerless in this congregation...it's more likely we'd never make it without the work and dedication of many widows. So who are those today who would occupy the same social and political and financial position that the widows of Jesus day occupied?

Single mothers? The homeless? The underemployed? Teenagers rejected by their parents because of who they are? Those who work hard and still can't make ends meet? The Palestinians? The oppressed Christian minority in the Sudan? The person living with AIDS? The unemployed? The mentally ill? Or are they those in our communities who speak a different language or just look different? Are they the young men and women who live in the world that Ta-Nehisi Coates fears for his son? Are they the teens who are wards of the state who will soon to be abandoned by us, their collective parents, when they turn 18? Are they the addicts seeking a new hope? Or the thousands upon thousands of incarcerated women and men in our nation? In some way all of these are the widows of today, for like the widows in Jesus' day, they are neither welcome nor given much consideration in the centers of power and influence.

All of us are invited, and I'm thinking the strength of Jesus' language today might suggest something stronger than an invitation ...to commit that what we do

here in this building and in the world out there...with our time, our talents and our money...will truly be to the glory of God...not the glory of us....if our goal will be to live out the faith we have been given...to join our lives and our strength and our struggles to those whose needs are great...to join them and God in making this a church and a world that is more just, more loving, more of a home for all, more of a waystation of hope and transformation for all...more...as we say at that table...of a gift of God for the people of God.

Perhaps this is why this is Jesus' last public lesson...to ask us -- is there any greater invitation than to join our might, with the widows' might...with the might of our saving, transforming Christ....in the Divine quest for peace, the Divine exercise of hope, the Divine life of compassion? Is there any greater goal we can proclaim in word and deed than this? None that I know. May God grant us the wisdom and strength to accept the invitation. Amen.