

Mark 12: 38-44

THE WIDOW'S MITE IS A CLASSIC GOSPEL STORY—A GO-TO FOR STEWARDSHIP SERMONS. WHO HASN'T HEARD THE MOVING ACCOUNT OF THE WIDOW WHO SLIPS QUIETLY INTO THE TEMPLE, DROPS HER MEAGER OFFERING INTO THE TREASURY, AND SLIPS AWAY? WHO HASN'T SQUIRMED WHEN THE QUESTION IS ASKED: "IF A DESPERATELY POOR WIDOW CAN GIVE HER SACRIFICIAL BIT, HOW MUCH MORE SHOULD WE—SO COMFORTABLY WEALTHY BY COMPARISON—GIVE OUT OF OUR ABUNDANCE TO FURTHER THE LORD'S WORK?"

MARK PREFACES THE WIDOW'S OFFERING WITH AN ACCOUNT OF JESUS BLASTING THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS OF HIS DAY FOR THEIR GREED AND CRASS EXPLOITATION OF THE POOR. "BEWARE OF THE SCRIBES," JESUS TELLS HIS FOLLOWERS. "THEY DEVOUR WIDOW'S HOUSES AND FOR THE SAKE OF APPEARANCE SAY LONG PRAYERS." THEIR PIETY, IN OTHER WORDS, IS A SHAM, AND THE RELIGIOUS INSTITUTION THEY GOVERN IS CORRUPT. WE DON'T HAVE MUCH PROBLEM WITH THIS. WE HAVE LITTLE USE OR TIME FOR HYPOCRITES.

IN THE SECOND SECTION OF THE READING, JESUS COMMENTS ON THE WIDOW GIVING HER TWO SMALL COINS TO THE TEMPLE TREASURY. SOME MAY READ THIS AS JESUS COMMENDING THE WIDOW FOR HER SACRIFICE, BUT THOSE WHO READ THE PASSAGE CAREFULLY REALIZE JESUS DOES NOT DO THIS. RATHER, HE SIMPLY TELLS HIS DISCIPLES THAT THE TWO SMALL COINS SHE GAVE ARE WORTH MORE THAN THE GIFTS OF THE RICH PERSONS WHO GAVE MUCH MORE MONEY BUT SACRIFICED VERY LITTLE.

JESUS NEVER COMMENDS THE WIDOW, APPLAUDS HER SELF-SACRIFICE, OR INVITES US TO FOLLOW IN HER FOOTSTEPS. HE SIMPLY *NOTICES* HER, AND TELLS HIS DISCIPLES TO NOTICE HER TOO. JESUS CALLS HIS DISCIPLES TO NOTICE THAT THIS WIDOW GIVES ALL THAT SHE HAS—LITERALLY, "THE WHOLE OF HER LIFE". SHE GIVES HER WHOLE LIFE. THE WIDOW GIVES ALL SHE HAS TO AN INSTITUTION THAT IS GOING TO BE UTTERLY DESTROYED. IN THE VERY NEXT PASSAGE JESUS DECLARES OF THE TEMPLE, "NOT ONE STONE WILL BE LEFT HERE UPON ANOTHER; ALL WILL BE THROWN DOWN." IS JESUS CALLING HIS DISCIPLES TO NOTICE THAT THIS WIDOW GIVES ALL SHE HAS, LITERALLY, "THE WHOLE OF HER LIFE", TO SOMETHING THAT IS CONDEMNED AND GOING TO BE DESTROYED?

THIS IS THE LAST SCENE IN JESUS' PUBLIC MINISTRY. FROM HERE ALL THAT REMAINS IN MARK'S TELLING IS THE TEMPLE DISCOURSE AND THE PASSION NARRATIVE. SO THIS WIDOW OFFERS A GLIMPSE INTO WHAT JESUS IS ABOUT. HE IS ON THE WAY TO GIVING THE WHOLE OF HIS LIFE FOR SOMETHING THAT IS CORRUPT AND CONDEMNED; ALL OF HUMANITY, THE WHOLE WORLD. THE WIDOW'S STORY MIRRORED JESUS'S. THE WIDOW GAVE EVERYTHING SHE HAD TO SERVE A SYSTEM SO BROKEN. "SHE OUT OF HER POVERTY HAS PUT IN EVERYTHING SHE HAD, ALL SHE HAD TO LIVE ON." THE GREEK WORD BEHIND "ALL SHE HAD TO LIVE ON" IS *BIOS* (FROM WHICH WE DERIVE 'BIOLOGY.'). IT MEANS "LIFE." IN OTHER WORDS, THE WIDOW SACRIFICED HER WHOLE LIFE. I DON'T THINK JESUS WAS GIVEN TO EXAGGERATION. IF HE SAYS THE WOMAN GAVE EVERYTHING SHE HAD, WELL, SHE GAVE EVERYTHING SHE HAD. WE KNOW SHE WAS A WIDOW IN FIRST CENTURY PALESTINE, A WOMAN LIVING ON THE MARGINS OF HER SOCIETY. SHE HAD NO SAFETY NET. NO HUSBAND TO ADVOCATE FOR HER, NO PENSION TO DRAW FROM, NO SOCIAL STATUS TO

HIDE BEHIND. SHE WAS MOST LIKELY IMPOVERISHED AND VULNERABLE IN EVERY SINGLE WAY THAT MATTERED. WHEN YOU READ ON IN MARK, JESUS DIED ROUGHLY FOUR DAYS AFTER THE EVENTS IN THIS STORY. I WONDER WHAT HAPPENED TO THE WIDOW.

ON THE SURFACE THIS STORY GOES MUCH DEEPER THAN A CALL FOR US TO GIVE. IF JESUS NEVER COMMENDS THE WOMAN, NEVER APPLAUDS HER OR INVITES US TO FOLLOW HER. WHAT DOES HE DO?

JESUS *NOTICES* THE WIDOW. HE SEES WHAT EVERYONE ELSE IS TOO BUSY, TOO IMPORTANT, TOO SPIRITUAL, AND TOO SELF-ABSORBED TO SEE.

JESUS'S EYES ARE EVER ON THE SMALL, THE INSIGNIFICANT, THE UNLOVED, AND THE HIDDEN. WHAT DID JESUS NOTICE IN HER?

DID HE NOTICE HER COURAGE? I IMAGINE IT TOOK QUITE A BIT OF COURAGE FOR HER TO MAKE HER GIFT ALONGSIDE THE RICH AND POWERFUL.

DID JESUS NOTICE HER DIGNITY? SURELY SHE HAD TO PROTECT HERSELF WHEN WIDOWHOOD RENDERED HER WORTHLESS. SURELY SHE HAD TO TRUST..THAT HER TINY GIFT HAD VALUE IN GOD'S EYES.

THIS WIDOW SACRIFICED AND IT CAN BE EASY TO PUT HER ON A PEDESTAL. AT TIMES, IT SEEMS THAT SACRIFICE IS BEST WHEN SOMEONE ELSE IS DOING IT. WE MARVEL AT SUCH FIGURES AS MOTHER TERESA, THE FAMILIES OF SLAIN OR INJURED SOLDIERS, OR TEACHERS IN TOUGH INNER-CITY SCHOOLS. WE LIFT UP THE POOR WIDOW, KEEPING HER DISTINCT AND DISTANT FROM OUR DAILY LIVES. THE FOCUS IS ON *HER* GIVING AND THE INADEQUACY OF *OURS*---BUT OUTSIDE OF THAT NOTHING CHANGES. THIS IS ONE OF THE PROBLEMS OF THINGS WE PUT ON PEDESTALS. WE DO NOT IMAGINE OURSELVES ALONGSIDE THEM BECAUSE WHAT THEY REPRESENT FOR US IS OFTEN MORE THAN WE CAN GIVE OR MORE THAN WE CAN IMAGINE WE ARE CAPABLE OF GIVING.

LET US THINK OF THE COINS REPRESENTING MORE THAN MONEY. JESUS SAID "SHE PUT EVERYTHING SHE HAD, ALL SHE HAD TO LIVE ON." COULD THAT MEAN HER FAITH AND HER BELIEF? IT IS NOT SO MUCH THE ACT OF GIVING OR RECEIVING, AS IT IS THE ACT OF BEING..OF PUTTING EVERYTHING ON THE LINE. HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT OF YOUR OFFERING BEING PERSONAL? FOR AUGUSTINE, OUR DUTY IS TO PRESENT OURSELVES...ALL OF WHO WE ARE..TO GOD IN THE COMMUNION MEAL. HOWEVER, RATHER THAN CONFINE AUGUSTINE'S COMPELLING CHARGE TO COMMUNION, HOW CAN WE TAKE THE GRACE AND HOPE WE FIND IN THE WINE AND BREAD AND MAKE IT LIVE IN OUR LIVES IN WAYS THAT NOT ONLY SUSTAIN US, BUT MODEL FOR OTHERS THE ENORMOUS POWER OF OFFERING ALL OF WHO WE ARE TO THE REST OF CREATION?

MOST OF US SPEND TOO MUCH TIME ON THE SURFACE OF FAITH: DEBATES AND DISCUSSIONS, FEELINGS AND FAVORITE HYMNS, PENNIES AND POTLUCK DINNERS. WE ARE DEALING WITH TOPSOIL, WITH THE OUTER LIMITS OF OUR RESPONSIBILITY. CHRIST CALLS US TO DIG DEEP. TO GO BEYOND THE SURFACE, DEEPER THAN EASY ANSWERS. TO LITERALLY GIVE ALL WE HAVE..OUR VERY SELVES.

PERHAPS JESUS WANTED HIS DISCIPLES TO NOTICE THE WIDOW BECAUSE SHE REMINDED HIM OF SOMEONE. IN FOUR DAYS HE WILL BE DEAD, HAVING UNCURLLED HIS FINGERS FROM AROUND HIS OWN OFFERING, TO GIVE UP THE TWO COPPER COINS OF HIS LIFE.

PERHAPS THE KEY QUESTION FOR HIS DISCIPLES WAS NOT, "HOW MUCH WILL YOU GIVE?" BUT "WHAT WILL YOU HOLD BACK?" JESUS, LIKE THE POOR WIDOW, HELD NOTHING BACK. IF ASKED BY JESUS, WHAT ARE YOU HOLDING BACK, HOW WOULD YOU RESPOND? PRAYER: HEAVENLY FATHER, WE THANK YOU FOR BLESSING US TO SEE ANOTHER DAY. HELP US SURRENDER OURSELVES TO YOU..TOTALLY AND WHOLEHEARTEDLY TO THE LEADING OF YOUR HOLY SPIRIT. MAY OUR LIVES BE A MIRROR THAT REFLECTS THE IMAGE OF CHRIST. AMEN.