

## “Two Small Copper Coins”

Mark 12: 38-44

The irony of this being the lectionary text this Sunday is not missed by me. After the recent election, after the shooting which happened in California, the irony of the widow's mite being our lectionary text on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Armistice Day, otherwise known as Veteran's Day, the irony of it all is not missed by me.

Sure, we like to assume this is one of those safe biblical texts, you know one of those texts which allows us to stay in our comfort zones because after all, it is about a widow. How dangerous can a widow be? I'm guessing whoever is asking that question doesn't know much about church ladies and the unwritten rule in many of our churches, that rule being...don't make them mad because then nothing will ever get done around the church.

All joking aside, we assume a lot about the widows in our Bible. After all in biblical times, widows were part of the least of these. They relied on others for food and housing. In biblical times, widows were not the movers and shakers of society. They were not the political powers of the world. Widows were often pushed aside and ignored. So we assume when we look at this text, that since it mentions a widow, we are getting a safe story, a feel good, helping others type of story which we church people like to share.

Except let's think about the widows in our Bible. There are eleven widows mentioned in both the Old Testament and New Testament. This is not counting all the times the prophets and the laws mention the call to take care of the widows. These are just the stories about certain named and unnamed widows in our sacred texts. Eleven Times, a story is told with the main character as a widow. Time and time again, these widows in our faith stories defy expectations. Their actions make life giving changes to the systems of the world. And each time, these widows experience and bring about miracles through the power of God.

For example, we have Naomi and Ruth, both widows. Looking at their story, it doesn't appear to be much at the start until Naomi does a little finagling, gets Ruth together with Boaz and brings about the family line for King David and Jesus.

And then we have the widow of Zarephath. Elijah asks her to make him some bread when he comes upon her while being on the run from the king of Israel for something he said. She tells Elijah that she has nothing except for a little bit of flour and a little bit of oil. Her plan is make some bread for her son and herself and then wait to die. Elijah tells her, Do not be afraid. He again asks for bread, telling her that God will take care of her. Miracles happen and the widow's food supply is extended for many days. She has enough, more than enough to sustain her son, herself and Elijah for days to come.

Or what about the parable of the widow and the unjust judge? Now she is hardcore. This widow basically pesters this judge because he refuses to hear her case. She persists day in and day out with her claim until the judge finally relents and hears her claim for justice. The beauty of this story is that Jesus ends this parable by saying, “God sees the widow and will provide justice for his chosen people who cry out each and every day. Jesus uses this widow as an example, reminding his disciples to persist, to be faithful against all odds, no matter what. The widow in this parable is hard core.

And then today, we get the story of the widow and her two small copper coins. On the surface, once again, it looks like a cutesy-feel good story. The lesson for all us seemingly being...Look at this widow. She is giving everything she has. Even though she is poor, she gives more than all the others. Isn't that special? So we should be like this widow, giving all that we have even if it puts us into poverty.

Let me stop right there and simply say, this way of thinking does a disservice to the widow, to us and more importantly to God. First and foremost our God is a God of abundance so I'm not thinking God wants us to all go into poverty, just so we can give until it hurts. And I know God is not wanting the widow to give away everything she has, because again, that doesn't say a lot about God if that is what God requires from us as God's people? By giving away all that she has, how

will this widow survive? How will she eat? What will she do to sustain herself?

Again, that's not the God we know and have experienced in our lives! Our God is a God of abundance and love. Our God will never require us to go into poverty just to prove our faith to God. Share our gifts with others-yes but not at the expense of our very being.

So what if there is more going on in this text than we realize? What if this widow is like all the other widows found within our sacred text? What if through her actions she is working to change a system which keeps people oppressed? What if she is working to bring about another miracle, another act of hope which will spark a recognition of the Kingdom of God in the people's midst? What if this widow is actually truly living out a life before God as a prophet for justice and peace?

Here's why I say this: As you have heard me say before, context is everything when it comes to understanding the stories of our Bible. This story takes place in Jerusalem in the Temple. At this point in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus has already ridden through the gates of the city. He has already turned over the money changers' tables after calling them all robbers in the house of God. At this point in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus has already had a couple of disputes with the leaders of the Temple, pointing out that they don't practice what they preach.

All of this is backdrop for this story of the widow's two small copper coins. Jesus is again in the Temple, teaching, again not making friends with the Temple Scribes. He tells his disciples to watch out for the legal experts. They like to walk around in long robes. They want to be greeted with honor in the markets. They long for places of honor in the synagogues and at banquets. They are the ones who cheat widows out of their homes, then turn around to give long pious prayers, just to show off to others. Jesus tells his disciples that for this hypocrisy, they will be judged most harshly.

Jesus then follows this up with an observation. He sees rich people coming and placing extravagant amounts into the treasury while a widow walks forward, placing in two coins worth about a penny. Jesus then turns to his disciples and says this widow has given more than all the rest because she has given out of her poverty.

Now, what we need to remember is that Mark is not known for being the social justice gospel. Mark is not known for lifting up the plight of the poor. That's Luke. What Mark is known for is pointing out time and time again the hypocrisy of the religious institution. What Mark is known for is pointing out the religious institution's failure to practice what it preaches. And this story is no different. Mark is asking us to think about the systems in place, systems which we support through our actions and inactions, Mark is asking us to think about the systems in

place, systems in our world, and yes, even systems in our own churches which help create a void of abundance for other people, systems like our love of cheap goods, systems like our love of plastic, systems like our love of mission trips to certain areas of the world which allow us to be tourists without having to engage the deeper issues affecting the people of that region.

By lifting up this widow and her two small copper coins, Mark is asking us to remember that as disciples of Christ, as the Body of Christ here on earth, we are not called to go about the “busyness of church”, but to be about the business of church, the business of being a voice for the voiceless, the business of making justice for the oppressed, the business of sharing the wealth of God’s love, the business of living out a faith which constantly sparks recognition of the Kingdom of God in our midst, the business of practicing what we preach.

Remember, just a few verses before our reading, Jesus says that the greatest commandment is to love our God with all our heart, mind and soul AND to love our neighbors as ourselves. We can't do both of these if we are not taking a look at the systems of this world, the systems which yes sometimes make our lives better but in doing so, make other people's lives worse by keeping them locked into cycles of poverty and oppressions. As people of faith, we cannot love our God and our neighbor as ourselves if we are saying long pious prayers in our sanctuary on Sundays and then devouring widows' houses when we leave.

For Mark, the story of the widow's offering is not only a critique of the Temple back then. It serves as a critique and a word of caution for the community of faith now. By lifting up the widow and her offering, he is reminding us that we are called to be the church, to be the church of love, to be the church of justice, to be the church of mercy, to be the church of grace. We are called to be a people who love God with all our heart, with all our mind, and with all our soul. We are called to be a church where our business is always serving God and caring for God's people. We are called to always practice what we preach as the ones who are a part of the very real Body of Christ here on Earth.

Huh, who would have thought a story about a widow and her two coins would do all that? Amazing what can happen when we open our heart and our eyes to the transformative power of the Kingdom of God in our midst.

Knowing this, may we never forget our mission again as the Body of Christ here on Earth. Amen.