

The story that I want to talk about today takes place in the Temple – in the Court of Women – so called because the women could go no further into the temple than this.

It's a story from Mark 12 that takes place after Jesus has already entered Jerusalem on the back of a donkey to the acclaim of the crowd. He had already overturned the moneylender's tables, taught in the temple, debated taxes and questioned the honesty of the Sadducees and Pharisees.

And now, he taught the disciples in the Court of Women – where the treasury was located. It was here that there were 13 different treasury boxes – lots of options. Some were for substitutions for sacrifices – so instead of sacrificing 2 turtledoves, one could put the equivalent in the appropriate treasury box. Some were for paying the temple tax – which went into the upkeep of and purchase of material for the temple – like wood, incense and gold. And there were 5 or so treasury boxes for donations – for just anything else needed.¹

It was here, we read in Mark 12, that Jesus sat opposite the treasury boxes and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in lots of money – which, I'm sure, we all know, make lots of noise as coins clatter and clink into the metal boxes.

So Jesus and the disciples sat in the temple people watching – and here Jesus pointed out some interesting things. We read:

⁴² A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.

⁴³ Then he called his disciples and said to them,

"Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.

⁴⁴ 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 text has often been used by pastors or treasurers on stewardship Sunday – to motivate us to give all we've got faithfully.

When we look to the Greek, we again see some wonderful wordplay in this account. The widow is described as one of the "ptoxos" - a destitute person, most likely subsisting by begging. This word seems purposely chosen to contrast with the "plousioi" - the wealthy, who put large sums out of their abundance into the offering boxes.

Another term which is rich in meaning comes at the end of the passage where Jesus says she puts in "all she had to live on." The term is well known to us: "bios." It means one's whole life. This woman has put her "whole life" into the offering plate.

This widow "put in everything she had." Yes, this woman, in this act of giving, acted unselfishly (even if perhaps unwisely). Yes, this widow did what she thought she needed to do and, without pomp and circumstance – she gave her life.

Jesus made a point of addressing the woman's situation with the disciples – and noted the contrast between what she gave (everything/her life) and those who gave only some out of their abundance. We could just wrap up the story and the sermon here – and say, in truth, "Like the woman, we too are called to give our all to God – and to not be skimpy with our giving – whether that is with money or time or gifts – or all three. We are called to give our all to God."

Yet, the story seems to be about more than that.

Sometimes the headings in English Bibles stop us from seeing necessary connections. The break between Mark 12:40 and Mark 12:41 is captioned with titles like: "The Widow's Offering" or "A Poor Widow's Contribution" "The Widow's Mite" or "An Act of Faithfulness" and this prompts us to read 12:41-44 as a separate, distinct story from what precedes.

But these headings aren't there in the original writing – and the stories flow seamlessly together.

In fact, we often miss some important links and insights when we take the text out of its context. Remember Jesus is teaching in the temple – and has just had debate with the Pharisees, Sadducees and now scribes. And so, I want to read to you the passage again – but include the context in which Jesus taught about the poor widow. We read...

Mark 12:38-44

"As he taught, he said,

"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."

He sat down opposite the treasury,
and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums.

A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.

Then he called his disciples and said to them,
"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.
That changes a few things, does it not?

All of a sudden the passage isn't about the woman who gave all she had – but rather about 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 honour at banquets and who say long prayers for the sake of appearances.

This is a rant against the pride of the scribes. And in an honour/shame society, pride in 'honour' was not unusual.

But Jesus' criticism of their practices became more serious, as even their economic policies are questioned. They devour widows' houses...what does THAT mean? Did the scribes demand a huge

temple tax that would make living unsustainable? Apparently, Mark wanted readers to see a connection between this activity and his observing the poor widow putting only 2 copper coins in the offering plate. But here's the deal. Jesus' criticism of the scribes was not unique to this story alone. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus and the scribes had a sort of tension. Right at the beginning of the Gospel, Jesus was said to have taught with authority – not like the scribes. Other times we read of how the scribes criticized Jesus healing the paralytic man who was lowered in through the roof, Jesus' eating with sinners, accusing him of collaborating with Satan, and eating without ceremoniously washing hands. As Jesus continued to preach and teach and heal in the name of his Father, he recognized his tension with the scribes. And Jesus predicted that the scribes and chief priests would reject him and eventually, “condemn him to death” (10:33).

And yet, juxtaposed with this ongoing tension between Jesus and the scribes is this poor widow. She, most likely didn't mean to become part of the debate between Jesus and the scribes. “Who is more faithful,” Jesus seems to ask, “this woman or the scribes who take everything from her?” “This woman who gave out of her life or the scribes who gave out of their abundance?”

But let's take another look at this woman who gave from her life. Dori Zerbe Cornelson – who used to work at Mennonite Foundation – looks at this story as one of protest. Maybe instead of placing her two coins in the treasury quietly she throws them in – so they clatter around loudly – and so that everyone will know that she gave and she now has nothing – reminding the community of temple worshipers of the injustice of demanding a sacrifice from those who have nothing.

In contrast to the protesting woman we see the showy piety of those who give much out of their abundance. And I am cautioned in my assumption that market values are God's values.

Could it be that Jesus points out this particular widow now as a living illustration of what it means to feed the widow and care for the orphans and sojourners in our midst? Could it be that he is pushing his disciples then and now to simply take note of the one who is normally invisible when compared to the glitzy givers?

Could it be that as our attention is drawn to her, we are also made more deeply aware of how the needs and the voices of so many like her are ignored --- or that we become aware of how we exploit those who have only enough to survive and we expect them to do with their little like we do with our abundance?

Too often, like the disciples so long ago, unless it's pointed out to me, I choose to ignore or deny that economic injustice is happening all around me. That those with plenty receive more, and those with little are expected to give more. It's only within the last decade or so that I've come to see it and feel genuinely uncomfortable. And I am not at all proud of the fact that seemingly more important things cloud my vision too much of the time.

And I wonder, what is the good news – what is the Gospel in this story about the widow? I think, first, it is a story about transformation – about how, when we look with the eyes of Christ, we will see things as they really are. We will see the scribes and the widows among us – and with the love of Christ we will work in these places and situations for hope and justice. God works justice that lasts and that my paltry little efforts, while to me seem really vital, only complement God's incredibly huge work of bringing wholeness with the Kingdom of God.

Second, there is good news too in the context of this story. Immediately after this account of the woman who gave out of her life, Jesus leaves the temple. A disciple talks with Jesus about the beautiful building structure of the temple – a building which Jesus says not a single stone will be left on another.

We remember the shift in worship that Jesus brought – instead of finding God only in the temple – God was now, through Christ and the body, the church – accessible to all. The temple would be destroyed – yes, but God's presence will be released to the world. This too is good news. No more will a widow's sacrificial offering determine whether she has a place in the Kingdom. **All** who come are welcome.

Third, there is good news for us. I don't think we need to be afraid of giving with gratitude out of our abundance. This is a story about stewardship and is pointing us to something much larger than how much we put in the offering envelope this Sunday or any Sunday to come.

Rather it is a reminder on how we steward our lives – our whole lives and our relationships with others. Instead of ignoring the poor – we are called to become poor. Instead of giving out of obligation, we are called to give out of gratitude. Instead of living for the sake of appearances, we are called to be genuine.

Fourth, the good news is that money isn't where it's at, and yet, how we steward our money can be the start of changing us so that, in the name of Christ, we can participate in changing the way our family, our church, our community, our whole world views wealth and power.

Friends, God's love for the world and all who are in it has never changed. God has ALWAYS loved the lost and the least and scripture ALWAYS points us to follow God's lead. May God's presence surround you and urge you forward.

And as we learn to follow the way of Christ, may his vision becomes our vision and everything that we do and say reflect that good news. I pray that God's love for all people will continue to wiggle its way into my heart - and into yours - to open our eyes and make us restless for more.