

WGUMC November 8, 2015 Mark 12:38-42
"The Widow's Wisdom"

Do you remember when you were young and thought you knew everything? When I was in college I took a year of Greek, so I could read the New Testament in the original language. I figured then I would know what it really said. Well, it wasn't long before I discovered that there is more than one correct way to translate many passages in the Bible. And even if we get it right, we still can't be sure that we know what the passage means. As we in the Wikipedia Age hopefully have learned by now: knowledge does not equal wisdom.

So I come to our reading today pretty sure of what the text says, but not so sure of what the text means. I have some knowledge, and I am seeking wisdom.

We all know this story and think we know this widow. Here is Jesus, sitting opposite the temple, watching people make their end-of-the-year tax-deductible contributions to the temple treasury. The rich put in huge sums, although not

enough to make them uncomfortable. Then comes a "poor widow," which seems redundant because widows in that day and age were almost always poor. They are also uncomfortable. She puts in two small copper coins, which is everything she has, and becomes the poster child for sacrificial giving.

The conventional interpretation of this passage makes the poor widow a hero. Forgotten the rest of the year, she is trotted out on stewardship Sunday by pastors who want the rich to act more like the poor when it comes to giving to the church. Just think of what the church could do if the rich would give until it hurts! But there is another interpretation of this passage, one that pays closer attention to the context than to the pledge campaign.

Throughout this chapter of Mark's Gospel, Jesus has been in conflict with various religious and political elites—the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians and the scribes—who have all been trying to trap him into saying something that

could get him into big trouble. Finally, Jesus warns the crowd to beware of the scribes. They are the temple bureaucrats and other petty officials. They are dangerous because they have just enough power to want more of it. They're the wannabe's who like being seen and admired in public. They like getting the box seats and sitting at the head table. They like making a show of their piety by saying long prayers. They are your typical corruptible officials and Jesus calls them out. Specifically, he accuses them of devouring widows' houses. Whether by fraud or foreclosure, we don't know, but apparently when these guys go strutting around, they don't mind stepping on the poor.

But it isn't just these leaders who are bad. In Jesus' judgment, the whole system has gone bad, so bad that in the next chapter, he will start talking about how the temple itself is going to be destroyed. That's like saying we're sending

bulldozers to Washington, D.C., which is maybe not such a bad idea.

Set in the context of a culture of corruption, our story begs for a different interpretation. Now we see Jesus watching as this poor widow gives all that she has to an institution of oppression. I wish I could see his facial expression. As for the widow, she becomes less of a hero and more of a victim.

In a sense, everyone—not just the poor—are victimized by the huge amounts of money in The System. The rich give large sums because money buys them access to power. Donald Trump boasts about it. But the widow's two coins don't buy her anything. Her mite doesn't matter at all.

The same is true today. Don't get me started on *Citizens United*, the Supreme Court decision that let open the floodgates of Super PAC money into politics. But it isn't only in politics that money holds sway. We gush about the uber rich here in the Valley and their hundred-million-dollar donations to

nonprofit organizations. But they aren't just out to help people; they are determined to make policy. They are trying to buy changes in the way we manage education, health care, the environment, and the government. Their donations may be very well intended, but they are not very democratic. When even the good guys think that dollars=power, we have a problem.

To challenge the assumption about money and power, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury." And what did he mean by that? She had what the rich don't have: nothing. She gave what they could never give: everything. And that tells us something: that Jesus is always messing with our values! Maybe that's why he's such a hard sell in Silicon Valley. But there's something else. Jesus is telling us about this widow: she is not just a victim, but she's a very different kind of hero.

It's easy to lose the widow in this story. She has no name. She speaks no lines. She seems to be just a prop in a morality play. So it's hard to know, but I think Jesus wants us to know what motivates her to give. In those days, the very poor were not expected to make donations, so she isn't giving out of a sense of duty. Everyone she knows is probably also poor, so it isn't because of peer pressure. And she can't give enough to be noticed, so she isn't expecting any political favors. So why does she give?

I have no idea if this woman was aware of how corrupt the temple system was, but the temple itself was still the dwelling place of God. For a people pressed down by their Roman occupiers, the temple was a sign of strength and stability. For them, it was a symbol of their solidarity; it was the center of their community. I can only imagine that this poor widow wanted to feel a part of the community. Because we know what it looks like when you don't.

When you are cut off from the community and pushed to the margins of society—as are the poor and the homeless and the mentally ill and the disabled and the runaway and the refugee—when you don't fit or are not welcome in public places, you can lose your dignity. And once you become invisible, others forget your humanity.

So I think I might have an answer for why this widow gave her two coins to the temple treasury. She had no family, and she wanted to be a part of God's family. She had no connections and she needed a God-connection. A feeling of belonging was a necessary part of her humanity. And so with her two coins, she was saying that she was a part of that community. For this widow, giving became essential to living. And it is the same for us today.

When I was a pastor in Santa Cruz, the church had a drop-in day center for the mentally ill renting space in our education building. We almost always had folks living in their cars on the

property. We tried to encourage them to come to services and always welcomed them with hot coffee if they just wanted to come in from the cold.

One Sunday, the women were holding a baby shower during coffee hour for the pregnant pastor. Everyone brought gifts all wrapped up in pretty paper. A homeless woman and her five-year-old daughter were living in a camper in the parking lot came, and they came in for the party. They didn't have a gift. I don't know what mom felt about that, but the little girl did something about it. She took some plastic party favors that she found on the serving table and with a big smile held them out to me. She had nothing to give, but she wasn't going to let anyone deny her her humanity. Even though she couldn't have said the words, she needed to give and wanted to be a part of the community. Church members gave out of their abundance; she, out of her poverty. But she gave more than anyone else that day.

Now I'd be the first to admit that churches do a lot of things wrong, but some things we get right. Of course, the Church is an institution, so if you go looking for it, you're sure to find corruption. After all, the church is full of people. But churches are still dwelling places for God and gathering places for God's family, in spite of some of the folks who are there. The church is still a symbol of stability and staying power in a very here-today, gone-tomorrow society. And it is still a center for the kind of community that is harder and harder to come by, especially in Silicon Valley.

Working my way to the end of the sermon, I can see that even if we gain all the knowledge in the world, we won't get anywhere without this widow's wisdom. If she could speak, she might tell us that despite the shortcomings of our communal institutions, we still need them. We support the church by giving so that we can teach others an important lesson about living. But this widow has a wisdom that goes beyond

institutions and transcends temples. Her wisdom is this: it doesn't cost us much of anything to be human, only everything—everything we have and everything we are. The widow lived it. Christ died for it. And it can be our truth, if we claim it. Lord, in your mercy, so be it.