

I've said it a hundred times. Context is SO important when reading and interpreting Scripture. Today's Gospel story is told in both Mark's (12:41-44) and Luke's (21:1-4) Gospels, and they both place this story at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry- the last week of his life. We're focusing on Mark's version of the story this morning. The Gospel writer Mark notes that leading up to this story, "Jesus offers one scathing critique after another of the economic and political exploitation he witnesses around him. He makes a mockery of Roman pomp and circumstance when he processes into Jerusalem on a donkey's back. He cleanses the temple's money-mongering with a whip. He refuses to answer the chief priests, scribes, and elders when they demand to know the source of his authority. He confounds religious leaders on taxes, indicts them with a scathing parable about a vineyard and a murdered son, defeats them on the question of resurrection, and bewilders them with riddles about his Davidic ancestry. Jesus then returns to teach in the temple and afterwards sits opposite where they collect money. "Archeologists believe that the treasury was located in the Court of the Women, the furthest point in the Temple where women were permitted to go" (Diana Butler Bass, e-newsletter, *The Cottage*). This is where we enter today's story. Jesus witnesses a widow give her all to an indefensible institution, one that refuses to protect the poor. So why on earth would he turn around and praise her for endangering her already tenuous life to support an institution he considers corrupt? The simple answer is, he doesn't" (Debie Thomas, [journeywithjesus.org](http://journeywithjesus.org)). Let's read the story together with new eyes but first let us pray. **PRAY. READ.**

What would Stewardship season be without the widow's mite- her two leptons? These coins, known as leptons, were 1/64 of a denarius, and one denarius was one day's wage. This widow gave all that she had to the Temple in Jerusalem- the center of sacrifice (livestock and produce) as well as the monetary center, where there are massive repercussions far and wide. Yes, the temple wasn't just a Jewish holy site but a Roman money maker. Yes, "this story is as much a narrative of justice as it is one of stewardship. Unlike Jesus, the directors of the temple treasury take everything from her and other poor people like her, while allowing the wealthy to give what they desire. Yes, God does desire a disciple's complete devotion, and God's leaders must not use the traditional mandates of 'sacrificial giving' to squeeze the life out of sincere followers who have little, while coddling those who have more and should thus be challenged to give more" (*The Discipleship Study Bible*). The lines between the temple and Rome were way too blurry and intermingled. For example, the high priest was nominated by the Roman authorities and a daily sacrifice was offered there for the sake of the Roman Emperor. I imagine there was a lot of under the table handshakes, metaphorical back scratching and turning of heads between the Roman authorities and some of the Jewish leaders, both priests and scribes. Afterall, Rome was constantly observing and evaluating the Jewish leaders, and Mark tells us that these leaders feared both the Roman authorities and the large crowd. It takes a lot of money to maintain the system and thus the status quo. "The Judeans as a whole invested the equivalent of 1,972 years of work for every year that Herod's temple operated" (Margaret Aymer, Lecture at DART Clergy Conference

2/24). The scribes played a role in the courts to give discipline and judgment and were economically dependent on the Roman rulers. In other words, the scribes were complicit in the empire whether they were aware of it or not. And please hear me, I'm not saying that scribes are bad and this widow is good. What I'm saying is that this is an ongoing conversation Jesus keeps having about particular scribes.

Notice though that "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. This is a moment in the story when I'd give anything to hear Jesus's tone of voice, and to see the expression on his face. Is he heartbroken as he tells his disciples to peel their eyes away from the rich folks and glance in her direction instead? Is he outraged? Is he resigned? Does he tell one of his friends to run after the woman and give her a bit of bread, or at least a drink of water? What does it mean to Jesus, mere seconds after he's described the Temple leaders as devourers of widows' houses, to witness just such a widow being devoured? And worse, participating in her own devouring? Here's a telling postlude: immediately after the widow leaves the Temple, Jesus leaves, too, and as he does, an awed disciple invites Jesus to admire the Temple's mammoth stones and impressive buildings. Jesus's response is quick and cutting: 'Not one of these stones will be left upon another; all will be thrown down'" (Thomas).

We take this classic story of Christian giving- the poor widow who gives all she has to the church and we pastors just *run with it*. We prop that poor

widow up, like window dressing at the Macy's parade- and watch her let loose of the little bit of life that she has left and drop those coins in the church's coffers and say "Now how about you?" *If you think your tithing is heroic now try following that act.* But in truth that use- and I mean- use of scripture- rubs me the wrong way. Let me throw this widow under the bus to grab your conscience. Feels wrong to me somehow. Not just for you...but for her. Seems like she has more dignity & courage than being used as a cheap stewardship trope. It makes me squirm not so much because "the question indicts my giving but because this woman's brief appearance in Mark's Gospel haunts me; her story is sharp-edged and troubling. Something in me doesn't want her reduced to a moral, or exploited for the sake of capital campaigns and annual budgets. Something in me feels indignant. I wish I knew her name" (Thomas). I remember my first Easter at Triune during COVID- we gathered out in the parking lot. I made a makeshift baptismal font and placed in on the parking lot. An unhoused parishioner arrived late to the service and didn't see me pouring the water into the font during the Prayer of Confession, so she didn't know it's purpose. After the sermon this parishioner decided to leave but before leaving, she came forward and dropped her coins into the font- like a wishing well. I don't know if anyone else even noticed?! Maybe she thought it was where to put the offering?! At first I chuckled to myself but then I thought of this story of the widow and her coins and how no one else seemed to notice her in today's story aside from Jesus. Jesus was the only one who NOTICED her and her contribution. And he wants others to notice her. This minor character, one of the invisible people in the world, one who

no one really pays attention to. Major characters are all around her though...dazzling everyone with their costumes and drama. With their nice Easter outfits...I mean with their long robes and their places of influence. Everyone is looking at center stage – at the people with flair and style and importance. And this widow – well she was on the outside – “out of food, out of money, out of what it took for a single woman to scratch her living among a people who looked right through her as if she were not there.”

(Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*) And Jesus notices this woman on the periphery, and he calls his disciples to notice her as well. Why does Jesus notice her? We can only speculate. Perhaps her courage? Her dignity? Her vocation as a prophet? Regardless of why, Jesus doesn't just notice her, he comments to his disciples: "She out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." Side note: I really struggle with this for multiple reasons, especially the “all she had to live on” part. She gave it all!

Part of participating in GOAL Justice as clergy is to try and attend the DART (Direct Action Research Training) Clergy Conference in Orlando, FL every February- where the rabbis and Christian pastors involved in justice ministries like GOAL around the country gather to look at the text together. We're led by a theologian in residence, a biblical scholar, who pushes and challenges us to really read the text as a community. This year's theologian was Dr. Margaret Aymer, a Presbyterian flavored New Testament scholar, from Austin Theological Seminary in TX. And this very text was one of our passages for the week. Dr. Aymer began by asking the question, “What if this passage is about our choices and how they can harm people, if we

aren't careful?" Take for example, the best seat at the banquet- the long, fancy robes, those who wear them don't have to do manual labor. A few of these long robed scribes are in the business of making the poor poorer by devouring the houses of the widows and praying these long prayers. Protecting the most vulnerable in society, such as widows and orphans, matter big time for God (Ex. 22:22-23, Deut. 10:18, and Deut. 27:19). Let me be clear. Jesus isn't condemning the scribes for wearing fancy robes and wanting the best seats. He is outraged that these particular scribes are oppressing those whom they should be protecting. And the widow instead of turning her back to her religious tradition, she walks out in front of that scribe and gives the last two cents to her name. The widow walks into the Court of Women, the only place in the temple she is allowed to go, with her dignity and gives her whole life, not letting this scribe have the last word.

I think we all need to ask and answer questions such as "Who is benefiting from the coin?" And "How do we participate in exploiting others?" "How does the system 'devour widows' houses' in our community?" After all who is doing the work of the scribes and masking the work of the system in our community? How did that widow end up in the situation she was in? How do we get to the root of what's going on? Perhaps Jesus is calling his disciples to not only notice the widow but to become system checkers, not system beneficiaries. Perhaps Jesus is calling his disciples to notice the widow in order to hold systems accountable and speak truth to power, not to become a puppet. Some of my fellow preachers hide behind the prosperity gospel to explain away why the widow ends up in a situation like

this. But really...how much more could she have given? We need to ask ourselves are we the ones depriving the most vulnerable about us- the orphans and the widows? Friends, let us notice, pay attention, and then act- calling out, as Jesus did, any form of religion that “manipulates the vulnerable into self-harm and self-destruction! Any form of piety that privileges long-winded prayers over works of compassion and justice or that justifies soul-killing suffering as redemptive! Any systems, including the church, that have exploited the poor, including devouring widow’s houses! “Any practice of faith that coddles us into apathy in the face of economic, racial, sexual, and political injustices” (Thomas)! German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “The Church is only the Church when it exists for others...not dominating, but helping and serving.” And we cannot do this while joined to the State...while intermingled in an unjust system. We know the widow was impoverished and vulnerable in every single way that mattered. She was two coins short of the end. Fellow disciples of Jesus Christ, when we know better, we do better. Let us pray.

*God of the poor, God who was poor, You entered human history impoverished and homeless, and fled in search of refuge to a land that was not your own. You understand the meaning of the poverty of deprivation, whether body, mind, or spirit, temporary or indefinite, of culture, class, or gender, anywhere in the world. Give to the hearts of all the poor good things in abundance for the enrichment of their lives. We turn to You, we pray to You, You who feed the hungry; give shelter to those experiencing homelessness and heal the brokenhearted, until You come again. Amen (WomanWord).*