

Text: Psalm 146; Mark 12: 38-44

Title: The Widow's Mite Revisited

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One of the challenges we always face in the church is the assumption that we already know what the point of any given passage. I mean, we have heard umpteentyump sermons on the Widow's Mite, right? *We know* that Jesus is commending her sacrificial giving, right? You know" I've just got to tell you that this never made any sense to me. I mean, Jesus is the one who upholds the poor and disenfranchised, right? He feeds the 5000, he tells us that "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God, right? So why is it OK with him that this woman is giving literally all that she has to live on to the Temple- one of the wonders of the ancient world? It's not like the Temple needed her 2 pennies. Something else has to e going on here. What does Mark want us to understand?

Mark spends chapter 12 slamming the religious and political aristocracy. First Jesus compares the chief priests, scribes and the Sanhedrin to those murderous vineyard tenants who killed the landlords' so in order to keep the vineyard for themselves. Then you have the Pharisees and Herodians (a more opposite teaming you cannot imagine- say Rush Limbaugh with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi) trying to trip Jesus up about paying taxes with Roman coins.(the image of Caesar cold be interpreted as a grave image0 Jesus sidesteps them with Give to Caesar what is Caesar's what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's. then we get the Sadducees who do not believe in the afterlife wanting to know whose wife a woman would be if she was widowed and married several times- Jesus calls them ridiculous and they hit the road. Then Jesus is teaching in the Temple pointing out the basic problem with the scribe's understanding of who the Messiah is- the Messiah is not the exclusive property of the Davidic kings.

Finally we get to our passage, and true to form, Jesus is taking another shot at the Scribes. In the economic pyramid of the time, the Romans were at the top, followed by King Herod, then the Priests and the Scribes. Drawn from the priestly class, the scribes were professional interpreters of the Law- which was the center of human life. We owe our Old Testament to them. So it is no surprise that they are patrons of the

Temple. You know how this works- if someone is rich and they are patrons of a given institution, people just know who they are. I'd be willing to bet that if Bill Gates or Warren Buffet suddenly joined our church we too would be wrestling with issues of power and influence. Someone who could erase our mortgage with a swipe of their debit card carries a lot of weight. It's just the way that it is.

So it comes as no surprise to us that we see people bowing and scraping to the scribes. We've already said that they occupied one of the top economic tiers. I think it must be human nature, but we keep equating wealth with God's blessing and morality. Don't get me wrong, I have known wealthy people who were gracious good and moral- but then again, I have met millionaires that were amoral at best. Jesus said it- money is neutral, but the love of money is the root of all evil. So here we have the scribes in designer robes, accepting the adulation of the crowds as their due. They were the interpreters of the Law, they should know that the Biblical ethic is that the wealthy are to take care of the poor. Typical is Psalm 146 which points out that the Lord has a soft spot in his heart for the poor and the oppressed. One doesn't have to read between the lines to see that the Lord gives justice for the oppressed and food to the hungry, so if you are going to stay on the right side of God you will do the same. But in almost the same breath the Psalm says don't hold your breath waiting for help from the top of the economic and political pyramid- those people think that their position is their due and will not lift a finger to help those in need. And isn't that exactly what we see here?

A poor widow (remember, there is no social security here) is doing what the Priests, Scribes and Pharisees have told her that she must do to worship God, give all that she has to live on. Jesus knew that they knew the words of Amos the Prophet: *You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. For I know how many are your offences and how great your sins. You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts..... I hate. I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on*

like a river, righteousness like a never failing stream! To see a widow give all that she had while these self important peacocks strutted around must have made Jesus' blood boil. Take another look, Jesus is not so much extolling the virtues of the widow as he is slamming the hypocrisy of the scribes.

To be fair, I don't think that the scribes sat up one night plotting how to oppress our nameless widow. Their sin is one of arrogance and omission. I bet they didn't even think of how their teaching was affecting those who were not in their social class. Look at us, Presbyterians tend to be middle class. We don't think of ourselves as rich and probably would be surprised if we ran across someone who thought we had wealth above measure. There are those in our community who would think so. We take education for granted- of course our kids are going to college. If they don't want to go away to college right away, we have an excellent college literally next door- yet there are those to whom the dream of going to college is inaccessible as the dark side of the moon.

I am not saying that this text commands us to feed the poor and fund scholarship funds. There are plenty of passages better suited to that. What I want us to do is to open our eyes to the unconscious obstacles we place in the way of our own or other's experiencing God more fully. I have a colleague who calls Presbyterians "Cocktail Hour Christians." What he means is that we project a certain image- and will do almost anything to protect that image, even if it means suffering in silence. Every pastor I have ever known knows people who stopped going to church because they lost a job, lost a business, lost their house, are going through a divorce, or their children are in some sort of trouble. The idea that their church family might find out their situation is mortifying. The real irony is that at the same time I have known Presbyterians to give money to cover expenses; to give blood so that someone might get an operation; and to provide food. This hesitancy to let our defenses down with our church family has less to do with being Presbyterian than it does with being part of the demographic we tend to draw from. We might joke about being God's "Frozen Chosen" but to the extent that we unconsciously place a barrier to someone experiencing God's love in the body of Christ- it's high time that the defrost button get pushed.

What other barriers do we put in place? Churches are multigenerational places. And generational cohorts share assumptions that are not necessarily shared by other generational cohorts. Given this, there was an idea a couple of decades back that churches should organize over the preferences of a particular generation- who thought that was a good idea? It was an unmitigated disaster and since then we have consciously embraced being multigenerational. But those unspoken assumptions are still there. For instance, Wednesday is Veterans Day. For some, Veterans Day is very important. For those who came of age through the maelstrom of Vietnam, Veterans day is largely less so- as all things military came under suspicion. It's too early see how those who came of age with the 1st and 2nd Gulf wars and 9/11 will deal with Veterans Day. But the question remains – in the Body of Christ we are part of each other. Will we insist that our particular understanding of the importance of Veterans Day is the “right” one? Or will we see this as an opportunity to learn from one another, to honor one another and, in the end love each other as Christ loves the church. This is a conscious choice we make, like the choice we make to let down our defenses or the choice we make to make a difference in each other's lives and the lives of others.

That's the bottom line- we have choices to make. When we choose, we are no longer unconscious about our actions. The scribes blithely went on their way, unconscious of the poor and doing nothing to help our poor widow. For that, Jesus lowers the theological boom- like Amos before him he states that God will not honor their sacrifices; God will instead honor the widow. Yesterday many of us worked at a Habitat for Humanity house. It was great fun- for we were experiencing together what it means to be the church in the community. This month the Mission Committee reminds us that there are food pantries that need food- and the non perishable food fairies are not going to get the job done. So we have the 12 baskets of Thanksgiving- sort of the 12 days of Christmas a month early. Make a choice to participate. Last Friday some of us got together to talk about David- why is he so significant and why did God hold him in favor often in spite of his actions? It was great fun- make a choice to learn more. We are surrounded by choices; opportunities not go blithely unconsciously on our way. Let's open our eyes and be the church, choosing to remove any and all obstacles that stand in our way. Let us pray.