

**She's the One**  
Mark 12: 38-44  
November 10, 2024  
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She's hard to spot in that crowd, the unnamed widow who slipped into the temple in Jerusalem one day long ago. Jesus is there, too, sitting on the floor, teaching his disciples. He places himself right across from the Temple treasury. Here, he can see everyone, because it's Passover time, high holy season, and the temple is bustling, busy with all sorts of Pilgrims who have made their way to the city.

Everyone who comes to the temple goes by that temple treasury. They go to give their offerings, whatever they have, whatever they've decided to bring. The religious leaders are all there, too, people with money, power, and influence, all dressed up in their expensive robes with long sleeves, dropping their money into the large open-mouthed horns that were in the temple to receive the offerings.

They're putting on a big show for this most important week of the year. They are also watching, to see how much people put into that offering plate. They need to know because their livelihood comes from the money that's dropped in.

The air was full of clanking and clattering as the gold coins rumbled down the mouth of the horns. The woman in that crowded hall unobtrusively reached into her own pocket. She removed two small copper coins and placed them in the treasury.

No one even noticed, except Jesus, who always kept his eyes open for people on the margins and for signs of the outbreak of heaven on earth. He noticed her. Actually, he did more than notice her. He knew the two most important things there were to know about her: first, that she was of modest means, and second, she was the wealthiest person in the place, in terms of riches that last.

The last thing Jesus does before his final meal in the upper room and then his court appearance, the last thing he does is point to the widow. We might have anticipated his public ministry to end on a more triumphant note: a dramatic healing, a powerful sermon, a tricky debate with the Pharisees, a profound parable. In Mark's gospel, Jesus' public ministry ends not with the heart thumping crescendo of a thrilling last movement, but quietly and unexpectedly with the "clink, clink" of the widow's two copper coins in the temple treasury.

It's her final sacrifice, the last that she has. No one else sees it, but Jesus notices, and he calls to his disciples to see for themselves. Look at her, she's the one: "The rest of them have given out of their abundance. She out of her poverty has given all that she had." Think of that! The Bible only asks for 10%! She gave 100%. Most of us give from our excess, from our extra, from our abundance. But she gave everything.

Early in my ministry I remember a young mother in our congregation in which she recounted a conversation she had had with her young son. The boy's grandfather, her father, was at the time terribly ill and in the hospital. The mother and son had discussed how Jonathan might do something to make his grandpa feel better. Jonathan decided perhaps he should give Grandpa one of his stuffed animals.

They went into Jonathan's room and went through the great, massive collection of stuffed animals: dinosaurs, teddy bears, Sesame Street characters and so forth. Jonathan rejected everyone. He said, "I know what I want to do. I want to give Grandpa my Tigger." His mother said, "Jonathan, Tigger is your favorite. You can't go to sleep without Tigger. You play with him

every day."

"Jonathan would not be moved," the mother told me." So, we took Tigger in all his tattered black and orange glory to the hospital," she said. "I had wanted my father to have something my son could spare. But my son wanted to give him his dearest and his best."

Where does that kind of thing come from in the human heart? I think of the spiritual wisdom taken straight from the bone marrow of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. "It is in giving that we receive," St. Francis of Assisi once said. It is in letting go of the self that we are reborn into the authentic human life that God intends.

The widow's offering to the temple, what those of us raised with the King James Version of Bible will remember translated as the "widow's mite," an offering worth far more than the value of those tiny coins. Her simple gift reveals to Jesus spiritual qualities that befit all of his followers; indeed, her gift reflects something of the character of God.

The scribes liked to parade around in flowing robes, Jesus says. In the East, a long robe, which swept the ground, was a visible symbol of social rank. It was the kind of robe in which no one could either hurry or walk and was the sign of a leisured man of honor. At public events, the scribes liked to dress in such a way because it drew attention to themselves and to the honor they enjoyed.

The widow Jesus gazes in the Temple is a far cry from these scribes, who thought themselves to be at the top of the pecking order. The widow's simple, unpretentious, unassuming character reveals her humility, something the scribes could never appreciate.

Humility is a tough attribute to value in our society. Turning to the Presidential election just concluded and the story is pretty much the same: big egos are the rule of the day.

As a result, places of honor rarely go begging among our ruling class. In 2008, during Senator Obama's first run for the White House, a college friend of mine was working on the campaign's advance team organizing Obama's first campaign rally in Madison, on the UW campus. For the three weeks my friend was in town, I heard all about the behind the scenes maneuvering among our local elite: who would sit, who would stand, who would be nearest the candidate, who would and would not get to speak.

The irony of it all is that the heavenly Who's Who is going to be filled with names you will never read in the *Wisconsin State Journal* or hear mentioned on the network news. The heavenly Who's Who will be filled with the names of children, and blind beggars, and poor widows -- unpretentious, unassuming people. We have something to learn from such people, Jesus is suggesting, something about what heaven on earth looks like.

Humility isn't her only attribute. This widow also stands against the multitudes putting money in the treasury, some of whom were rich folk who put in large sums. There is no indication that the rich were anything but generous. In fact, Mark underscores their generosity.

Jesus simply says that true giving is to be measured not absolutely, by the size of the gift, but proportionately and relative to what is left. The widow's gift was two small coins, the smallest in circulation, but in the eyes of God, who looks upon the heart, this was big business!

Two coins: one she could have given and the other she could have kept -- 50% for herself and 50% for others, a lofty stewardship goal for any person or congregation. But no. The widow's kind of humble generosity is a spendthrift, Mark seems to be saying. This kind of generosity leaves its arithmetic at home. This kind of generosity 'is always in the red,' to quote theologian Paul Sherer.

And so, without any fanfare, Westminster has been quietly and generously at work in this community for years: collecting school supplies for students at Thoreau School, packing boxes

of fresh food to deliver to food insecure families, providing training space for Thoreau teachers, purchasing snow pants for children who need them when winter arrives, and now winter coats to give to those folks recently released from the county jail. The quiet generosity of this church goes on and on and on... becoming a mighty force of healing and hope for families in need in this community and beyond.

“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living.”

In her stewardship, the widow goes beyond percentages, bottom lines, net incomes vs. gross incomes vs. adjusted gross incomes to the heart of the matter of faith, ownership, and gratitude. She gave it all without calculation, because she knew it all belonged to God in the first place. She was only a temporary custodian for those two copper coins. God had entrusted to her the decision of what to do with them.

No gift is too small to count. Church Women United has for years been a part of an international Christian Women's group called the Fellowship of the Least Coin. Women from around the world set aside on a regular basis the least coin of their society (in the U.S., a penny), bring their gifts together which are sent to the Asian Church Women's Conference, which acts as the steward of the total amount that comes from all over the world. Many millions of dollars are raised annually for a variety of ministries benefiting low-income women worldwide.

The widow's offering: her humility, her generosity. She quietly leaves the temple precincts, and Jesus offers her as a shining example to us all at the close of his public ministry.

Even as Jesus utters his final words, a shadow falls across this scene, the shadow of what is to come, the shadow of a cross. The cross that is God's supreme act of humility. Taking the form of a human being, God's Son comes to live and die among us. The cross, where God's Son offered everything he had, even his own life. The cross--where we come to know in the tragedy and injustice of Jesus' death--God's incredibly generous, suffering love. The humility and generosity of the widow displays for all to see a foreshadowing of the humility and generosity of God revealed on the cross of Christ.

“She's the One” Jesus tells his disciples in that bustling temple. On this stewardship dedication Sunday, may we be the ones who follow in her footsteps.

Amen.