

The Widowed Prophet

Mark 12:38-44

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." (Mark 12:42-44)

“**T**he Widow’s Mite” is a classic Gospel story, a go-to narrative for church stewardship drives. Who hasn’t heard the moving account of the widow who slips quietly into the temple, drops her meager offering into the treasury, and slips away? Who hasn’t squirmed when a well-meaning pastor brings the story to its inevitable conclusion: “If a desperately poor widow can give *her* sacrificial bit, how much more should we—so comfortably wealthy by comparison—give out of our abundance?”

I’ll admit it; I’ve squirmed. I’ve squirmed 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. I wish we celebrated her fierceness, not just her generosity. I wish I could know for sure that she died in peace.

Died? Yes. She dies, probably mere days after she drops those two coins into the temple treasury. In case that’s a surprise, consider again what Jesus says about her as she leaves the temple in Mark’s narrative: “She out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.” The Greek word behind “all she had to live on” is *bios* (from which we derive “biology.”) It means “life.” In other words, the widow sacrifices her whole life.

As far as I can tell from the Gospels, Jesus doesn’t lie. If he says the woman gives everything she has, well, she gives everything she has. We know she’s a widow in first-century Palestine, a woman living on the margins of her society. She has no safety net. No husband to advocate for her, no

pension to draw from, no social status to hide behind. She is impoverished and vulnerable in every way that matters. Two pennies short of the end. If I'm getting the timing right, Jesus dies four days after the events in this story. I wonder if the widow does, too.

Here's why I'm troubled by her story: What does it mean to applaud a destitute woman who gives her last two cents to the temple before slipping away to starve? Is this really a story of selflessness? Or is it a cautionary tale about naivete? Should we cheer, weep, or complicate the story further?

Mark prefaces the widow's offering with an account of Jesus blasting the religious leaders of his day for their greed, pomposity, and crass exploitation of the poor. Beware of the scribes, Jesus tells his followers. They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. Their piety, in other words, is a sham, and the religious institution they govern is corrupt—not in any way reflective of a God who cares for orphans and widows.

Indeed, in the days leading up to the widow's last gift, 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 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 confronts 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.

So why on earth would he turn around and praise a woman for endangering her already tenuous life to support an institution he considers corrupt?

The simple answer is, he doesn't. Read the story carefully; *he doesn't*. Centuries of stewardship sermons notwithstanding, 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 offer her a bit of bread or a drink of water? What does it mean to Jesus, mere seconds after he has 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" (Mark 13:2).

Ouch. I wonder if the widow is still on Jesus's mind as he predicts the destruction of the temple. He has just watched a trusting woman give her all to an indefensible institution, one that refuses to protect the poor. Is he saying that no edifice steeped in systemic injustice will stand?

Back to my earlier question: Should we cheer or weep in the face of this story? Or, here's a third alternative: Should we call out (as Jesus does) any form of religiosity that manipulates the vulnerable into self-harm and self-destruction? Any form of piety that privileges long-winded prayers over works of compassion and liberation? Any version of Christianity that valorizes suffering as redemptive? Any practice of faith that coddles us into apathy in the face of economic, racial, sexual, and political injustice?

Jesus *notices* the widow. He sees what everyone else is too busy, too grand, too spiritual, and too self-absorbed to see. For me, this is the only redemptive part of the story—that Jesus's eyes are ever on the small, the insignificant, the unloved, and the hidden.

What exactly does Jesus notice? I don't know for sure, but I'll hazard some guesses.

He notices the widow's courage. I imagine it takes quite a bit of courage for her to make her "insignificant" gift alongside the rich, with their fistfuls of coins. Even more to allow the last scraps of her security to fall out of her palms. And more *still* to swallow panic, desperation, and the entirely human desire to cling to life no matter what and face her end with hope.

Jesus notices her dignity. She has to steel herself when widowhood renders her culturally worthless—a person marked "expendable" even by the temple she loves. She has to trust that her tiny gift has value in God's eyes. In her astonishing generosity, Jesus recognizes a quiet power: those two coins are her gestures of defiance. They mark her subversive resistance to dehumanization.

And finally, Jesus notices her vocation. Whether she recognizes it or not, the widow's action in the temple that day is prophetic. She is a prophet in the sense that her costly offering amounts to a holy denunciation of injustice and corruption. Without saying a word, she speaks God's Word in the ancient tradition of Isaiah, Elijah, Jeremiah, and her other Hebrew ancestors.

But she is also prophetic in the messianic sense, because her self-sacrifice prefigures Jesus's. She, too, gives up her life in the face of an unjust system that exploits her. Perhaps what Jesus notices is kinship. Her story mirroring his. The widow gives everything she has to serve a world so broken, it kills her. Days later, Jesus gives everything *he* has to redeem, restore, and renew that same world.