

“Lepta”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
24th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 27B) – 7 & 8 November 2015
Mark 12:38-44

The widow carried two small coins called lepta. Their value was so low one wonders why anybody bothered making them. You literally couldn’t buy anything with just two lepta. It took over 100 of them to make a denarius, the normal daily wage for a worker, and a denarius only bought the barest necessities of life. Essentially, the widow had nothing: nothing to keep; nothing to give.

Maybe that’s why she offered them to God at the Temple. They weren’t going to do her any practical good. Perhaps letting go of her lepta symbolized a sort of desperate surrender, a gesture that said, “I give up,” in a world that tended to value the most vulnerable, like widows, as worthless. But Jesus didn’t see her that way.

Instead of worthless, he declared the widow worthy. Jesus compared her favorably to the wealthy people who offered much greater amounts. “For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had.” This contradicted conventional wisdom, which placed high value on people who threw lepta out with the trash. It also seems contradictory to what Jesus had just said.

You see, immediately prior to this episode, there are a series of scenes where Jesus came into conflict with the religious elite, culminating in an accusation Jesus made right before he went to sit down opposite the Temple treasury. He warned people to “beware of the scribes,” who Jesus described as status-seeking, praise-hungry, hypocritical thieves. “They devour widows’ houses,” Jesus alleged, or to put it plainly, the scribes, who were responsible for handling the finances of widows, were embezzling the funds and impoverishing the widows,

right down to their last two lepta. This is why it seems so contradictory for Jesus to praise what the widow did.

By putting those two lepta into the Temple treasury, the widow supported a corrupt system that had stolen her very means of survival. What is praiseworthy in that? The scribes had already taken nearly everything, and here she was giving them the little that was left. How could Jesus just sit there and allow her to do this? Shouldn't he have been outraged? Instead, he seemed inspired, pointing her out as an example of faith and generosity for his disciples.

Maybe it's a matter of perspective. Remember that Jesus saw this widow, deemed worthless by everyone else, as worthy. Likewise, maybe Jesus sees her differently than we do. I think we tend to see that widow as a frail victim, whereas Jesus might have viewed her as a feisty woman, determined to make a humble offering to God, despite having been exploited by the men who ran the Temple, despite probably knowing that what she gave would likely wind up in the greedy hands of people made rich by plunging widows into dire poverty. Maybe her act of surrender was, at the same time, an act of resistance, and maybe that's why Jesus let it happen.

However, I suspect there's more. Is it an accident that Mark placed this particular story at the very end of a long sequence of conflict scenes between Jesus and the religious elite? Is it a coincidence that this story comes so close to culmination of these conflicts, to the conspiracy that led directly to the betrayal, arrest, fraudulent trial, and crucifixion of Jesus? Could it be that the link between Jesus and the widow goes far beyond mere admiration and involves identification? What if, among the many names by which Jesus is known – Savior, Redeemer, Christ, Lord, King --, none fit so well as widow?

On that cross, he was so alone, abandoned by all but a few of his closest companions, not unlike a widow in a society that tended to shun them as a worthless burden. The scribes and

their collaborators who put Jesus on that cross stripped him of all they could: legitimacy, dignity; even the last scrap of cloth would come off before they hammered home the nails. Left without so much as two lepta to rub between his fingers, he would hang there naked and disgraced, mocked by the mob, an example to everyone of what happened to people who posed a threat to the system.

And once every tangible sign of value had been taken away and there appeared to be nothing left, an offering was made to God, an offering that went completely unnoticed, like two tiny lepta dropping into a box. It was an offering of surrender, an offering that said, “I give,” despite: despite what you’ve done, will do, and refuse to do, I give; despite your corruption and pettiness and avarice, I give; despite your ignorance and your arrogance and your insecurity and your lust for power, I give. Despite the money you took from the widows, and despite everything you took from me, I give . . . my life . . . for you – even though I know there’s a good chance you’ll waste it.

Did you know that lepta nowadays have become quite rare, quite valuable? Ironical, I suppose. Lepta were thin and fragile and made out of the least expensive materials, so most of them probably crumbled to dust over time, and the rest, being so worthless, were most likely melted down to make coins that really mattered to people. Hardly anybody knows what lepta are anymore, just archaeologists and collectors who have come to realize how precious those little slivers of metal actually are.

The offering Jesus made on the cross to God for us goes far beyond rare. It’s unique, more precious than anything else, certainly too valuable to leave to a handful of specialists and enthusiasts. We need everyone to meet Jesus the Widow, and everyone needs to meet him, and

every day that doesn't happen, the scribes steal from the widow, and the scribes are us. It doesn't have to be that way, though. It doesn't. Amen.