

Mark 12: 38-44 "Watching the Widow" 11/7/21 Rev. Janet Chapman

A man was going through a mid-life crisis and decided he wanted to join a commune situated deep in the Siskiyou mountains. He appeared before the registration team to answer a few questions regarding his sincerity and integrity. The team leader started, "If you have 2 cats, will you give one of them away?" "Yes, I will," he responded. "And if you have two tractors, will you give one of them away?" "Yes, certainly I will." "And if you have two houses, will you give one away?" He thought for a careful moment, and nodded "Absolutely." "And if you have two cows, will you give one away?" "No, I couldn't do that," he vehemently exclaimed. "Why on earth not?" "Because I have two cows."

Not two cows, but two coins is what the widow gives to the treasury in our story, seemingly unconcerned that they are her last. What would this season be without the story of the widow's mite, as we ponder God's gifts to us and how we give back to God? This week, you will be receiving by email or postal mail a letter from our Finance Committee Chairperson, Eda, inviting you to consider your support for the ministries of this congregation next year? On it will be a covenant slip to cut out and return by next month or even sooner. It is a simpler invitation compared to years past in respect to the need for more simplicity in our lives overall. Today's story reminds us of how much simpler the widow's life must have been in comparison to the rich young ruler, who couldn't do what Jesus asked because of all that he had. The widow gave without being asked; it was as easy as uncurling her fingers from the two coins and letting them fall into the treasury. They made such a small sound that no one could hear it and as far as she knew, no one saw it. She was one of life's minor characters, one of the invisible people who come and go without anyone noticing what they do, or what they have on, or when

they leave the room. Ironically, this event happens right after Jesus tells his followers to beware of the ones who have the power in society. “They walk around in long robes and want to be greeted with honor in the market,” Jesus says. “They long for places of honor in the synagogues and at banquets. They cheat widows out of their homes, and say long prayers to show off. They will be harshly judged.” A coincidence? I don’t think so. Jesus is setting up a contrast between the woman who is poor and powerless because she was a widow and the religious leaders who are rich and influential because they are Jerusalem’s elite. Economics in first century Palestine tells us there was no such thing as a rich widow back then. Women were totally dependent on their male relatives for their livelihood. Jesus takes the contrast a step further as he points out that many in power were devouring widows. The so-called “guardians of the faith” were guilty of sponging off those they were meant to serve.

So this section reads more like a lament and indictment upon any religious system that results in a poor widow giving all she has, so that the system’s leaders can continue to live lives of wealth and comfort. Right after this story, Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple revealing that the days are numbered for regimes that exist for their own well-being. On that day, Jesus promises that vulnerable persons like this widow will be delivered from their oppressors. Jesus insinuates that the temple is not worthy of her gift for it has become a den of thieves. As we in the church of today read this story, Charles Campbell says our struggle is to recognize where it is that we enjoy privilege and status in our society to the misfortune of others. History reveals again and again how human beings consistently preserve the systems from which we benefit, rather than confessing our mistakes and challenging the economic status quo of society. It is the task of the church to engage in spiritual practices which keep

political and economic systems accountable to justice, compassion, and mercy. The church must actively call all society to care for the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the poor thus embracing its primary purpose on earth. Giving to those in need is the spiritual life of the church which naturally flows out of the regular act of worship.

Jesus not only uses this drama of the widow's gift to draw attention to the abuses of the wealthy and powerful, he also highlights the attitude from which the widow operates. He calls his disciples to watch her, and to compare what she does with what everyone else is doing. He invites them to contemplate the disparity between abundance and poverty, between large sums of money and two copper coins, between pretending to sacrifice for God's kingdom and the real thing. He doesn't dismiss the gifts of the rich but instead points out that the major character in this drama is someone on the outside, someone the world considers minor and powerless. She is the one to be watched, the major donor among them all. Jesus notes that sometimes those who are the closest to being poor give the most to those in need. There is a tendency among those who are in the most precarious places in life to practice their faith closer to the church and in a quieter manner than those with money, power, and prestige. Maybe those who have experienced poverty give the most because they understand what it means to have nothing, and that they, that we, learn to appreciate what they have more than others? Maybe you know what it is like to experience the grief of poverty and debt? I know personally that as I get a stronger handle on my debts, I hope that I never forget what its like to pick which bill isn't going to get paid this month, to scrape together all the change in the house to send your child the money for a school activity, or to carefully put all the baby food and milk back in the fridge to be used later. The widow wasn't dependent on her money or her status in life

because she had none. She was dependent on God and her neighbor for everything. She didn't have two feet to stand on, she didn't have bootstraps to pull up, she was totally dependent on nothing but the grace of God. Mary Anderson goes on to explain that the issue is not how much we have in the bank, but what that money is to us. Is it our heart, our security, our source of power, or is it a tool for our stewardship? For wealth is like a viper - it can be harmless if someone knows how to handle it; but if they don't, it will entwine around you and bite with a vengeance. So are we dependent on our money to give us all we want and need for life, or are we dependent on God to make us rich in only the ways that God can? Jesus is seeking to teach us that it is our dependence upon God that leads us to joy and thanksgiving.

Anne Keegan wrote an article entitled "Blue Christmas," a collection of Christmas stories told by Chicago police officers. One was the story of George, who lived in a rented room at the YMCA. He had one set of clothes, shoes wrapped with rubber bands to keep the soles from flopping, and a threadbare black overcoat. He spent his mornings napping in an old metal chair by the heater in the back of the 18<sup>th</sup> district office. Two officers took an interest in the old man, occasionally slipping him a few bucks. They found out that Billy the Greek over at the G&W grill gave George a hot breakfast every morning, no charge. The two policemen and their families decided to have George as their guest for Christmas dinner. They gave him presents, which he unwrapped carefully. As they drove him back to the Y, George asked, "Are these presents really mine to keep?" They assured him they were. "Then can we stop at the G&W before I go home?" he asked. With that, George began rewrapping his presents. When they walked into the restaurant, Billy the Greek was there as always. George went up to him and said, "Billy,

you've always been good to me. Now I can be good to you. Merry Christmas." George gave all his presents away on the spot.

Our story from Mark's gospel is the last of Jesus' lessons about the upside-down kingdom of God. Jesus has revealed examples where the last shall be first, and the great shall be the servants of all, and the most unlikely people, just like George, turn out to be Christ himself in disguise. The poor widow is his last case in point. When he leaves the temple with his disciples that day, his public ministry is over. In four days, he will be dead, having uncurled his fingers from around his own offering, to give up the two copper coins of his life. Maybe that is why he noticed the poor widow in the first place. She reminded him of someone. It was the end for her; it was the end for him, too. She gave her living to a corrupt institution; he was about to give his life for a corrupt world. She withheld nothing from God; neither did he. It took one to know one. "She's the one," Jesus tells them when their time is up. "The one without a penny to her name; she's the one to watch." Will you and I know one when we see one... that one who withholds nothing from God... the one to watch, who will lead us all into the upside-down Kingdom of God?