

25 Pentecost B, Proper 27. November 11, 2018. Mark 12:38-44.

It might as well be a liturgical season. At least in the Episcopal Church, every mid-Fall most churches engage in what might be called “stewardship season.” You see, most Episcopal churches rely something very close to entirely on the money that parishioners donate, and since we draw up our budgets in early December, we ask in November for you to tell us how much you plan to give next year. This enables us to plan with that curious mixture of daring and prudence that is the hallmark of a faith-based, mission-oriented institution with no real endowment or independent funding stream. Here, we do it by asking you to spend a month praying and thinking about what you might give—what is possible for you and what might be possible for us together, with different levels of funding. During that month, we have parishioners each week talk briefly about what St. Christopher’s means to them and why they give to enable the work we do here together. We’ll have the last such reflection today, and we’ll collect and bless our pledges next Sunday. Our giving campaign this year has been ably led by Jenn Urso, to whom I am very grateful. Everybody’s giving campaign is wrapping up today or sometime or sometime soon.

And so this gospel story has preachers licking their chops across the country today. At first glance, it seems perfect, if your goal is to increase your budget as much as possible. The rich people give a lot and the poor widow gives everything she has, and while this isn’t a recipe for justice for the poor and widows, it is a recipe for a big church budget. Notice that Jesus doesn’t criticize anyone for their level of giving—he just points out the worth of her gift. So there, rich people give a lot, everyone else give everything, and we’ll be able to fund all kinds of new missions and relationships. It’ll work.

Only, when we look a little closer at this passage, it starts working less well for this kind of sermon than it did at first glance. To begin with, if we read just a little further in Mark, we’d hear Jesus predicting the imminent destruction of the whole Temple system, and so all the money in this story is going to a project that he knows is about to fail. Jesus never was much of an institutionalist, doing as much teaching outside the synagogue as in, and occasionally advising people to give their money directly to the poor, without losing giving power on overhead. And this whole giving vignette is framed by a warning against those who enjoy the trappings of status at the expense of people in need—which certainly isn’t an anti-giving theme, but does suggest that something else may be in Mark’s mind, here.

The root of the problem that we stewardship-minded preachers are going to run into today is that Mark is fundamentally disinterested in increasing our church budgets. The goal of the whole gospel of Mark is to convert us. Mark wants to convert us to a way of life, to a community, to a divine man who always noticed the poor widows. That is the point of this story.

Jesus watches some scribes—the intellectual and religious elite—walking around and he thinks of the oppression of widows. He watches many people giving money to the religious establishment, and the one he especially notices is a poor widow. Widows of course are real people in the gospel, but they are also a code word for all the dispossessed and disenfranchised of a society. In a world where all status was invested in adult males, a single woman beyond customary marriage age was, like children and slaves, simply outside of the status system. Widows were therefore unprotected by the usual social norms. This is why all the demands of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible eventually include justice for and care of widows—because the Bible is unequivocal that God has a special care for those the rest of us are likely to neglect.

And so in this narrative doublet, the widow plays two roles. In the warning against scribes, Jesus' insistence on referring the case of the fancy scribes to the lot of the widow rather forcefully calls our attention to the effects of our own honor and status system. We are not obligated to eat the rich, but to be a part of the community of Christ means always, always to consider the way the poor and suffering are being treated. So a Christian may be pleased to see certain high level economic indicators doing well, but we will always want to push beyond how the stock market is doing to watch the rate of homelessness and food insecurity. And, to cut a little closer to the bone, whether the church is using its resources to aid widows is much more important than the amount of resources the church has. The story of the widow and the scribe establishes a principle for our faith: that the followers of Jesus are called always to look underneath, to find the pain, and to tell the truth about its cause.

But the widow's role in this passage isn't all stern moral warnings. When the action moves to the treasury, her role can give us considerable comfort. Here the point isn't oppression, but the power and hope of good, regardless of power. By every empirical measure, the widow's mite is of less value than the large easy gifts of the wealthier folks. But Jesus draws special attention to her for giving even when it hurts. I'm not by any means saying, "Give the church all your money," and I don't think that's what Jesus is saying either. But let's not lie to ourselves: God asks for all of us. And here's the gospel good news in this passage: that all is enough. It might not look as impressive as what some other folks are bringing, but God specializes in working with surprising materials. And this I think too can be made a general principle of the faith: even when it looks like the good guys are losing, the small triumphs matter. The kingdom of God is built from pennies through poor widows. Amen.