

Widows are powerful figures in the Scriptures. They were among the most vulnerable people in Israel. Unless they had a father or a brother to protect them, widows didn't have a lot of options for supporting themselves. They are among the "little ones" whom God favored and protected – widows, orphans, strangers.

The earliest ethics of Israel said that God's people would be judged on how these little ones were treated. So widows are often featured in the Scriptures as models of faith and courage.

But the presence of impoverished widows is also a measure – a measure of Israel's righteousness and a measure of God's approval or disapproval of Israel's leadership.

This is the case with the widow in today's passage from the Gospel of Mark, who places what might be her entire life savings, or at least everything in her pocketbook, in the Temple Treasury today.

She is an example. But what is she an example of?

The obvious answer is that she is an example of the kind of faith that earns the full favor of God. That's compared to the Scribes, who were in the official business of currying God's favor by interpreting the law for others and having leadership in the Temple, the center of Israel's worship and wealth and its political life as a nation, subservient though it may be to Rome. In the 12th chapter of Mark, Jesus spends some time condemning the behavior of the scribes, whom he calls out for failing to recognize the Messiah in their interpretation of scripture, for being overdressed hypocrites, and for impoverishing widows. It's part of a wider judgement of what the Temple has become at the hands of the leaders of Israel, and it is making him some powerful enemies.

And then as Jesus sits observing people dropping money in the Temple treasury boxes, here comes such a widow, who drops two pennies – or leptons -- in the freewill offering box, which isn't even really enough to live on. The lepton is the smallest coin there is in Roman currency. It's ironic, no? She gives the least in quantity but the largest percentage – all she has, her very life. Some preachers might be tempted to make this a lesson about generosity and sacrificial tithing, but we're not going there even though it's Stewardship season.

This story of the Widow's Mite, as it's traditionally called, takes place after Jesus has triumphantly entered Jerusalem, where he will be arrested, tortured and crucified. Right now, he is in the Temple stirring up trouble with his parables and debating the authorities. When he observes the poor widow deposit her two coins, he is likely sitting in the Court of Women, which was as far as women could go into the Temple.¹ The Temple treasury was in view. The treasury wasn't a room, but a series of collection boxes with trumpet-like apertures for pouring in your coins. Imagine the sound that would make if you were dumping in a huge amount of money – like emptying Mary Rivera's full UTO

¹ See Biblehub commentaries at <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/mark/12-41.htm>

jug -- into a brass gramophone. Then imagine the sound of two little coins slowly spiraling down to the box below. Clink. Clink.

That difference is not lost on Jesus, who calls over his followers and says: "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."

Everything she had. All she had to live on.

Which meant that the widow didn't have anyone taking care of her. No one in Israel should be that poor, according to the law. And those who interpret the law, the scribes, should be scandalized by her condition and convicted by it.

The fact that this story lands in our lectionary right around election time this year is instructive. Because the widow herself is a measure of the legitimacy of Israel's religious and political leaders, which are one and the same. The ancient formula for this was to look to the health of widows, orphans and strangers, as we hear in today's Psalm 146. As Christians we have inherited this measure from our origins in Israel. It continues to be shorthand for the vulnerable among us today -- we know who they are. They include those who are immigrants, those who are impoverished, those who have disabilities, those whose racial or cultural or gender identities make them a target of violence and bigotry.

It's the measure that citizens who are followers of Jesus must use when evaluating and participating in our own political institutions. It was the case with the previous administration, and it is especially the case as we anticipate the next one.

So this is one way for us to consider the lesson in a story of a woman who had no protection in the system designed to take care of her. But I also wonder if this widow whom Jesus is watching at a distance, might be an example for us of something else as well.

By Jewish law, because of her poverty she is not required to contribute to the Temple treasury. But she does so anyway. This is what she chooses to do with all she has to live on.

And I wonder what happens after you give up everything you have to live on? What happens when you offer the last of your savings up to God?

I'm reminded of the widow in our first reading from First Kings who was down to her last bit of grain, and was planning to make a little cake for her son and herself, and then die. In that story God sent the prophet Elijah to minister to her in a profound act of mutuality. Share your last bit of sustenance with me, the prophet says, and God will provide for you and your family. And she does. And God did. A miracle. A lesson on how God cares for the little ones, and how God feeds his prophets.

But in the Gospel, there is no miracle for the woman. Just Jesus' observation about the superior quality of her faith in God, of her willingness to give everything to God.

Was she relying entirely at that moment on God's providence? With no one else supporting her, was she freefalling into the arms of God, trusting God with her very life as a beloved child of God?

Was she performing a crazy act of love, righteousness and faith in the God of Israel to save and deliver?

Who else does this in the Scriptures?

Well Jesus does. In a few chapters, he will hand God his life. He will freefall into the arms of his Abba. He will do it out of love for his people, out of openness to his Abba's will for him, out of his dignity as God's son. His choice.

It's not that the Scribes failed to give all their money to the treasury. It's that as interpreters of the law they failed to give all of their lives to God, down to the last little bit. Like this woman did. Like Jesus will do. What follows Jesus' gift of himself on the cross, is resurrection and everlasting life for all. I hope that widow too was caught in the arms of God and held and given new life. Maybe like Elijah helped the Widow of Zarephath. But Mark doesn't give us that much to go on. That's my midrash. My hope for her.

This woman, throwing in the last few coins she has out of whole-hearted love of God and fierce insistence on God's promises, gives me not only a measure for my citizenship this week, but she is also a role model I can turn to. Because I'm out of steam, down to my last two cents of faith. I can't compete with the economic motivations and bigotries that overwhelm the vision of who we should be and can be as a country right now.

But the story of this woman with her two pennies reminds me how over and over again Jesus points to the little ones, the tiny things, the emptied out, the absolutely powerless as the means by which God changes the world.

Like faith the size of a mustard seed, which then moves mountains.

And mustard seeds that when planted take over the whole garden.

And meek, and sorrowing and hungry and poor people who are marked for God's abundant blessing.

Of a limitless God pouring the divine self into the tight skin of humanity, and then pouring that self out again at the hands of public execution and rejection – as a means of bringing limitless, everlasting life to all who want it. To that widow with her last two cents. To us.

And that gives me hope this week, and the courage to throw in my two cents into the civic conversation that is only just beginning.

Amen.