

## THE WIDOW'S GIFT

Ruth 1:1-8, 14-22; 2:1-3; 4:13-17, OT p 241  
Mark 12:38-44, NT p. 49

November 8, 2009  
32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
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There it was – the temple in all its glory, gleaming white with golden trim, standing tall over the temple courtyard. It didn't have quite the impact on our study tour group as it must have had on Jesus and his disciples. We were gathered around a scale model at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. But we could imagine what an impressive sight that must have been for Jesus and his disciples, arriving from the hill country of Galilee.

Jesus had been coming to the temple courtyard for several days, teaching his disciples and the crowds that gathered around, answering the questions of the religious leaders, and finally, as we heard last week, stating his summary of the Torah: Love God with all that you are, and love your neighbor as yourself.

But now there is a pause in the action. Jesus sits down across from that magnificent temple and looks around. Some of the people walking through the courtyard are obviously religious leaders – the Sadducees in their priestly robes, the Pharisees in their prayer shawls, the scribes or scholars of the law dressed appropriately to their status. Some of the people may be merchants who have prospered in the Roman occupation – maybe not the most religious of Jews, but able to donate to the charities funded by the temple treasury. And some of the people are representative of the majority of the citizens of Judea and Galilee. They are very poor – tenant farmers who have lost their own land, or debt slaves who at least got one or two meals a day, or day laborers whose existence was the most precarious of all – except for the widows who had been left without sons or brothers to help them.

Jesus could have been impressed with the beauty of the temple. He could have

marveled at the variety of the priests' robes. He could have been amazed at the sounds of many coins dropping into the money boxes in front of the temple. He saw all of that, but none of those things were worth calling to the attention of the disciples. Instead, he notices a very poor woman, obviously with no one to support her, and yet she has something to give. When he sees her, he calls his disciples and gives them something to think about. "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." And he lets them think about it.

He doesn't say, "Go and do likewise." He doesn't say, "She's giving to a failed institution; what a shame." He doesn't say, "She will have treasure in heaven." He doesn't analyze her possible motives. He doesn't even hint that his disciples might help her. He simply asks them to observe and to compare. Her tiny gift was noticed, more than the impressive buildings, the elaborate robes or the large donations. This little woman in ragged clothes came to the attention of the one who would eventually be recognized as Son of God.

Naomi and Ruth, hundreds of years earlier, were widows, alone and on their own. No men in their lives, and no children. The two of them, a refugee from famine and her daughter-in-law, a foreigner, return to the old home village of Bethlehem. They have nothing, except Naomi's wisdom and Ruth's loyalty, and a man who is somehow related to Naomi's dead husband. The little they have becomes enough when the Lord blesses Ruth and Boaz with little Obed, whose grandson will be David, future king of Israel.

The world is full of widows, and many who are like widows, alone and without resources. Sometimes our hearts are moved to help those close at hand or in distant refugee camps. On the other hand, some folks might wonder what those folks have done to get

themselves into this mess, blaming the victim. Many times we simply don't see those people who are alone and lonely, who are struggling and desperate, just trying to survive. People who are financially or emotionally or spiritually poor can become invisible, even in the church.

Jesus calls us to notice these people. Pay attention. Become the kind of gathered community that makes his welcome clear. I hope this is a place where you can be yourself, where you don't have to put on a Sunday face. If you're thankful, you can speak up. I love it when we hear about what is happening with local sports or band or dance teams. Have you seen the St. Helens cross country news in the local papers? One of the star runners is a member here. If you're sad, you can cry, or ask for prayers out loud or in writing, or receive a hug. Or it's OK to discourage hugs and handshakes, given the possibility of illness. If you need encouragement to make a major life change, I hope this is a safe place for you to receive support. If you're in financial need, we have emergency funds that are available to members as well as to the community, and we try to keep that confidential. Jesus asks us to notice those among us who are in need.

Beyond noticing needs, however, I believe Jesus asks us to become aware of the gifts that each one of us has to share, regardless of our circumstances. When a poor widow receives praise for a tiny gift, we learn that we also must have something of value to give, even if we are poor, or alone or struggling with some kind of issue. It might take a while to figure out what that gift is, and to develop it, and to find a way to share it.

Let me suggest some kinds of gifts, and maybe you'll notice yourself or someone else in a new way. You might feel strongly that the point of being Christian is your relationship with God. Prayer is important to you, and so is helping other people to grow spiritually. And

maybe you have the gift of talking with others about their relationship with God. If this is your gift, you might feel that whatever else the church does, this is the most important part, because no other organization is dedicated to promoting our relationship with God through Christ.

But that's not everyone's gift. Some of you might have a passion for study. You love to learn about the background of the Bible and the ways the different books have been written. You love to share what you learn. Maybe you wish I'd preach more from the writings of the Reformers. Some Presbyterian congregations have had major celebrations of John Calvin this year, in honor of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth. Whatever else the church does, you believe it must have a firm foundation in the Bible and in our theological heritage.

But not everyone is there, either. Some of you, I know, are more hands-on practical folks. Your service to the church comes behind the scenes. You're the ones who give to God by serving on committees, cleaning the sanctuary, taking care of the lawn, providing snacks after worship, coming to choir rehearsal on Wednesday evening, and doing all those other little things that make it possible and comfortable for the congregation to come together to hear God's word and to go out refreshed.

But maybe, more than doing hands-on service for the church, your heart is with those in need in the community. Your hands are busy helping at Community Meals, or at the Food Bank. You serve at the Senior Center or drive for Meals on Wheels. You donate to service agencies in our community, and you keep informed about the practical kinds of assistance needed in other parts of our country and around the world. That is your much-needed gift to share.

Some of you have a sense that you can make a difference in a larger way, by pointing

out the discrimination and oppression built into our society's systems – attitudes and even laws that keep people from becoming who God has created them to be. Inadequate schools and lack of jobs, spending on war that keeps us from spending on peace, and all kinds of injustices built into our way of life – that is what you notice and work against all odds to see changed.<sup>1</sup>

We need gifts in all those areas – in spiritual growth, in education, in church support, in community help, in systems change. We support some of them more with money and some more with time. No one aspect is more important than another – all of these are essential to being the people of God together in this place. We need your particular gift.

Naomi and Ruth and the unnamed widow at the temple didn't have much, but they gave what they had. When Jesus compared the widow's two tiny coins to the generous gifts of the rich people, he seemed to be comparing the dedication of the givers. The small gift certainly made a much larger impact on the widow than the larger gifts did on those who were rich. What we give reflects our dedication as well. I hope this week we will hear Christ's call to notice the least among us and to honor their gifts. I pray that we will be inspired to give ourselves to his work, even as he has given himself to us. May we honor his gift with our lives.

Let us pray. O Christ, you have given yourself to us. May we dedicate all that we are, all that we have, to you. May our gifts be blessed and multiplied by your Spirit's power, so that our community and our world will know your grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>Five areas of service adapted from Jack Haberer, *GodViews: The Convictions That Drive Us and Divide Us*. (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2001).