

## The One to Watch

As far as she knew, no one even saw her. But then again, no one ever saw her. She was one of life's minor characters, one of those invisible people who come and go without anyone noticing what they do, or what they have on, or when they leave the room. She was a bit player, this widow, one of the extras on the side while the major players stride around center stage, dazzling everyone with their costumes and high drama.

In the temple scene that Mark describes for us this morning, it was the rich people and the social elites like the scribes who stood out. These folks knew that others were watching them and seemed used to it, even enjoyed it. When they entered a room, everyone knew someone important had arrived, someone whom others envied and admired. They were the celebrities in their day, with gossip mongers following their every move and paparazzi ambushing them at every turn.

*They* were the ones to watch, and people did watch them, everyone, it seems, except Jesus. Sitting outside the temple, opposite the treasury, Jesus could see the rich and famous as they dropped impressive sums into the collection box. But Jesus wasn't watching them; he was far more interested in what was going at the margins, and in one woman in particular.

It is hard to know why she caught his attention. She did not catch anyone else's, that's for sure. In the eyes of others, she was spent, all used up, out of food, out of money, out of luck, because she was out of a husband. Because women had no right to own property or sign contracts, she was without any means of taking care of herself, no one to stand up for her. She had become invisible. No one saw her anymore. No one, that is, except Jesus.

Jesus saw her walk to the temple treasury to give up her two coins, and something about the way she did it—maybe it was the length of time she stood there, or the way she cradled them in her hand like her last two eggs—something about the way she did it told him that it was the end for her, that those two coins were everything she had, literally her whole life. And she was giving it away. Plink, plink. That was the sound of those two coins as they fell into the collection box. The box, you see, was metal and shaped like a trumpet, so that when the wealthy people dropped their coins into it, it would rattle and clink and ring out so that everyone would notice the large amount they gave. Likely those who heard their loud donations smiled at their generosity and nodded their approval. But when the widow put her two coins in—plink, plink—no one noticed her. No one, that is, except Jesus.

He noticed her, we don't know why, but he recognized what it was she was doing, what it meant for her. I mean, she had two coins—two lepta, two pennies. Now, she could have put in one and kept one for herself. Yet she put both of them in. To her, there was nothing she had that was not God's and in giving it back to him, she was trusting God would provide for her. Maybe she knew the story we just read of the widow of Zarephath and how the Lord provided for her and her son. Maybe not. Either way, her sacrifice was complete, so complete that Jesus called his disciples over

to witness it. "Truly I tell you," he said to them, "this poor widow has put in more than all that the wealthy were contributing to the treasury. For all of them contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

In pointing her out to his disciples, Jesus seems to be saying that what matters is not *the amount* that is given, but *what that amount says* about our commitment to God. As Jesus observes, the rich gave from their abundance. Their giving came from what they didn't need -- from their excess, their surplus. They may have given large amounts, but it didn't cost them anything really. Pocket-change, we might say. After they had put their money in the collection box, they still had a great deal of money left over for themselves.

It reminds me of how, a few years ago, Ted Turner gave \$1 billion to the United Nations. On one hand that sounds *very* generous. On the other hand, he was not personally sacrificing anything. It was extra money that he had earned over 9 months through the stock market. He gave out from his excess -- from funds he didn't need. Few of us are rich enough to give away a billion dollars, but is what Ted Turner did that much different from the way most people give?

When most people give, it usually comes from what they have left over. They give what they don't want, what they won't miss, to the church and charity. After all, when people give clothing to Salvation Army or Goodwill, typically they are clothes they don't want, that don't fit, that aren't in style anymore, that are extra. Their closets are still full with newer and better clothes. They make sure they have money for movies and eating out and trips and all sorts of things, and if there happens to be any money left over, maybe, just maybe, they'll give some of that away. The widow, though, gave not from her excess, but from what little she had. Those two little coins were probably her complete life-savings, which made her last penny worth a fortune in God's eyes. And she gave it away. Hers was a beautiful act in the desert of gaudy piety. And that is why we know about her today, this nameless woman—because of her sacrifice.

Now, many sermons have been preached on this woman and her offering, admonishing churchgoers to be more like her, more generous, more trusting. But the strange thing is that nowhere in this passage does Jesus praise the widow for what she is doing. He doesn't say we need to be like her, giving away everything we have. He simply calls his disciples over to notice her, and to compare what she was doing with what everyone else had done. He invites them to sit down beside him and contemplate the disparity between abundance and poverty, between large sums and two copper coins, between *apparent* sacrifice and the real thing. He does not put anyone in the wrong. He does not dismiss the gifts of the rich. He simply points out that, in God's eyes, those we often take to be the major characters are in fact minor givers, while minor characters—the poor widow—can turn out to be the biggest givers of them all.

This is in keeping with things Jesus has said before about the upside-down kingdom of God, where the last shall be first, and the great ones shall be the servants of all, and the most unlikely people will turn out to have been models of faithfulness. The poor widow is his final example. When Jesus leaves the temple with his disciples that day, his public ministry will be over. In four days he will be dead, having presented his own offering, the two copper coins of his life.

Perhaps that is why he noticed the poor widow in the first place. She reminded him of someone. It was the end for her, just as it will soon be for him, too. She withheld nothing from God; neither will he. It took one to know one. When he looked at her it was like looking in a mirror at a reflection so clear that he called his disciples over to see. "Look," he said to those following him. "This is what I have been telling you about all this time. Look at her."

Of course, if someone had taken a picture of the temple that day and handed it to the disciples and asked them—"Where is God's beloved in this picture?"—they would never have guessed the answer. There were plenty of major characters in that room, after all—teachers of Scripture and patrons of the arts, rich people and smart people, famous people with names and faces people recognized—any one of them was a better bet than the raggedly-clothed widow. "She's the one," Jesus tells them when their time is up. "The little old widow, the one who gave all. She's the one to watch."

We might wonder why Jesus didn't say something to her, offered her some blessing. It was a great moment, when the tragedy of her life took on the possibility of meaning. It would have been a great tribute to her, when the enormity of her gift was acknowledged...only she never knew it. She walked into the temple with her last two coins in her hand and she walked out again without them, totally unaware that she was being watched. As far as she knew, no one even saw her. But Jesus saw her, and he pointed her out to his disciples.

And he continues to point her out today. For, after the widow dropped her two coins in the collection box, she didn't just disappear. She is alive today. The "widow" may come in the form of a woman or a man, child or adult. She won't be easy to spot, though, as she won't be on the main stage but on the periphery. But we'll know her or him by the fact that they will be giving something away: their time, their heart, their living, their life. We may not be able to see how much it costs them, but it is almost always more than we think.

Maybe you can think right now of a widow from your life. Someone who has given completely of themselves in faith. Maybe someone in this very congregation. Maybe some of you here today are wondering about your own contribution to the church but also to society, and maybe you're embarrassed by it. But if Jesus' words today tell us anything, it is that your offering matters too. It counts too. Then again, maybe you've been giving to the church out of your abundance, from what you can afford, what you can afford without making any sacrifices, without changing anything about the way you live or how you spend the money you've been given. Maybe Jesus' pointing at the widow is an invitation to consider your own commitment to God and God's mission. And if so, don't worry, there's still a little time left for you to increase your pledge!

But whether we are rich or poor, whether we have money or don't, whether we are comfortable or just barely getting by, one thing is clear: Jesus calls our attention away from those who have more than we do, towards those who have less, and who still give what they have. He calls us to look for them, to consider them, to keep an eye out for them, to ask ourselves as we go through our day, Where is the widow in this picture, where is the one who gives all, where is Christ here? 'Cause where she is, there Jesus is.... We just have to make sure we're watching for him. Amen.