

“The Lord watches over the strangers;
upholds the orphan and widow, but
the way of the wicked,
the Lord, brings to ruin.” AMEN!

Today’s reading is often used to reference
the widow’s total commitment in giving
“all she had” back to God.

It’s no surprise that the lectionary
has us reading it around the time
when churches begin to talk about tithing
and estimates of giving cards.

And while she is held up as
a paradigm of generosity
our conversation today will focus on

what she did, in conjunction with what
Jesus warned about,
while teaching in the temple.

And what he cautioned his listeners about
was to beware of those who like to walk
around in long robes, and

beware of those who like to be
greeted with respect in the marketplaces,

and have the best seats in
the “places of worship” and
places of honor at banquets.”

So, folks, beware of people like me. :-)

“Beware of people who walk
around in long robes.”

Historians note that the scribes often wore
black robes in Jesus’ day, maybe a little like
this one, but what some of them were
doing was not at all like

the message Johnny Cash sang
about in “Man in Black.”

In that song Cash says he wears
“the black for the poor and beaten down,

Living in the hopeless
hungry side of town,

I wear it for the prisoner who has
long paid for his crime, but is there
because he’s a victim of the time.” (Pause)

Look up the rest of Johnny’s lyrics
to “Man in Black” this week and you’ll find

that what he wrote about was not
evidenced at all by these
particular scribes

(or other worship leaders)
that Jesus warned about.

They showed no compassion for the prisoners,
they cared not for the homeless,
nor did they honor the widowed.

Jesus even went on to say,
“They devoured widow’s houses.”

We don’t have many specifics to what
he meant by that declaration but it appeared

that the temple authorities were doing things
that were making an already
vulnerable population of people
even more at risk.

Jesus’ warning speech precluded
the words about Jesus that come
next in the gospel.

He and his disciples are still in the temple
but now we are led to picture Him
sitting down to watch the way

the crowd was putting money
into the treasury.

The clearer translation is that
“many rich people were throwing in
a lot of money into ornate receptacles.”

This was the temple’s collection plate,
but it was shaped like the flare on a trumpet
and made of bronze.

Imagine the amount of noise that “throwing in”
a large gift of “temple approved coins”
would make.

Similar to the noise (perhaps) that we cheer
when the children dump their buckets of
the noisy offering collection,

but that’s our whole congregation’s gift put together.

Here, in the temple, individual givers
were competing to make the most “noise”
with their tithes to get personal ooh’s
and selfish aah’s.

Everyone noticed the big donors, but no
one noticed the woman, the unnamed widow,
who came and dropped in two small

copper coins, she threw in two lepta.

They were the smallest and least valuable
of all coins circulating in Palestine.

They were worth about 1/128th of a denarius.

A denarius was a day's wages for a worker in a field.

So, in today's system, if a laborer
makes \$50 per day, the widow's two coins
would have equaled about .39 cents.

It was all she had.

Imagine the pitiful sound those two coins
would make in relation to the other's,
noisy gifts.

No one noticed her, well, no one except Jesus.

Jesus not only saw her but he commented
to his disciples about her and about what he saw.

"This poor woman, a widow,
threw in more than all those who are
contributing to the treasury..."

It's usually at this point in the sermon

where the pastor or priest drives home
the point that we don't give all we have
to the church, like the woman did
to the temple.

But notice (please) that Jesus did not say
go and do likewise
to his disciples.

Jesus did not lift up this woman as
an example of sacrificial giving
so that preachers for the next 2000 years
would have a good sermon illustration
for stewardship Sunday.

No, in the context of all that happened around
the event, Jesus simply stated
what he saw her give and he commented
on the enormity of her gift.

So, if we are not supposed to do what she did,
what is Mark trying to tell us here?

Well, given the context we are being told
why Jesus warned about the temple leaders.

They were complicit in creating the conditions
in which this woman felt she had to give
her last penny to the temple treasury.

Not one scribe there that day, stopped her
from giving her last coins away.

Not one official said,

“Wait, a second! The temple is supposed
to be taking care of you,
not the other way around.”

Thus, they devoured the widow’s home. (Pause)

There is a place in the Gospel of Mark where
Jesus did advise someone to sell everything
they owned and give the money to the poor.

We read that challenging text a few weeks ago.

Do you think that telling a rich man
to sell his possessions for the poor is
the same thing as telling a widow to give
her last two coins to the temple?

Of course not, who can imagine
Jesus urging a destitute person to give
whatever little things they have to God?

The miraculous truth is, a lot of people
who are impoverished are often

the most generous people.

Even though I can't find a passage anywhere
in the Bible that demands a needy person
to give everything away,
we discover they are often very generous.

And Jesus sees it. (Pause)

For a long time, in my early 30's,
when Colleen and I began to be serious
about coming back to church,

I'd write a check to the church treasury
for \$7 each week.

We felt pretty poor at the time,
but we really weren't compared to
most of the world.

I just landed on \$7, for some reason.

But ever since then,
our offering each week went up,
year after year.

Even during our time in seminary,
when we needed federal assistance for
groceries and subsidized health care,

we brought an offering to God.

I'm not say that, because of the giving,
we never experienced hard times.

I'm saying it's hard to give money away,
but the more we do it the easier it becomes
and Jesus sees it.

I want my household budget to reflect our love
for God and for neighbor, generously.

We want our church budget,
including our pledges,
to show that this church loves God
and neighbor.

But, we won't ever make that happen
by putting the burden of giving
on the destitute,
that way is the way of ruin. (Pause)

The burden is on us, rich folk.

AMEN!