

Learning Generosity from a Widow

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave LeGrand

Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance, say long prayers.

Jesus and friends are opposite the treasury of the Temple. The religious officials are within earshot. Jesus is critical of the religious establishment of the time. In today's paraphrase we don't get the full sharpness of Jesus' criticism of some scribes – as devouring widows.

As Mark continues to tell the story, Jesus and friends watch as well-to-do, the financially established guard, give large donations; it feels like a parade. I remember days as a child in my church when offering plates passed around had no felt, so you heard the difference between donors placing bills and those dropping dimes and quarters.

Can I be honest with you? I feel like I'm one of those scribes Jesus warns about; let me tell you why. I enjoy some authority, at least within church circles. I have great privilege – a non-racialized male – I'm not at risk; far removed from the experience of that widow. Our privilege, or lack of privilege, colours how we understand scripture passages like this one.

Scripture, ancient as it is, can hit home. It liberates, but it also humbles. Institutions like the military, police, government, they have been barraged the voice of widows. "Widow" in the Bible is ancient shorthand for all those in ancient times who didn't matter. No voice, no possessions; in essence, no systemic power. Jewish law dictated that people who prospered were to care for the vulnerable, but the secular culture, the prevailing culture of time, cared very little for the least among them.

Anyone who says that the teachings and actions of Jesus in the Gospels did not have profound political implications needs to sit prayerfully with this passage. To overhear Jesus and his band of rogue Jews talking about how the widow's contribution of two lepta, the smallest monetary denomination of ancient Palestine,¹ that she gave far more than those who gave much more. This is off-putting, to say the least, to those who are trying to pay the Temple bills.

This, my friends, a legacy entrusted to us. Nothing short of revolution; turning the world's common sense on its head.

Luke's Gospel² has Jesus tell a parable about a widow and the unjust judge. The widow wants justice, but the judge ignores her, ignores her pleas so long that the widow has finally *had it*. In the middle of the night the widow goes to the judge's

¹ "Authority and caring for the vulnerable". Commentary on Mark 12:38-44 by Amanda Brobst-Renaud. WorkingPreacher.org

² Luke chapter 18

home and hammers on the door. The judge ignores. Finally the judge is so fed up that the judge relents; annoyed, the judge finally grants the widow her justice. Not a glowing commentary on the justice system of the time. To be honest, I don't think our institutions have improved much. I could criticize the Roman Catholic Church for its tone-deaf response to the cries of Residential School survivors, but then how long did it take for our United Church of Canada to publicly confess that we were complicit??

Today is remembered with a mix of gratitude and lament, the sacrifice of too many lives in wars and peacekeeping, the great risks taken. But also the injustices suffered by countless civilians caught within the horror of war. I hear a great deal of talk about democracy, freedom. But then I also note the economic reality, where those who are rich get richer, faster, while the numbers of disenfranchised, voiceless, angry – symbolized by the widow – they are growing in numbers.

What I see weekly at St. Andrew's is for me a remarkable counterpoint. Even as we painstakingly watch our spending, dedicated saints of this church do amazing work. Caring, Connecting, Innovating and Visioning. Jeannine came in early this morning to set up the Communion. Roger came yesterday to make sure our PowerPoint worked. Myfawny graciously sets up the rosters for Scripture readers while Leslie ensures that we have hospitality volunteers each week. Ralph, well Ralph, with a busy job during the week, but his contributions to this community are priceless. Sylvia, Bev, Debby, Scott, Diane, Phil, Anne, Bert and Jim. The names go on and on.

One scholar suggests that we need to see deeper meaning in the widow's contribution.³ Jesus said that she gave all of herself to God. Not the church as a building, or institution, but to God's work. We – our lives, our passion, our dedication – are of far more value than the institution, the building, or the sacred furniture in our worship spaces. Notice I'm getting this message out before we resume the Stewardship Sundays?

We need to honour the widows, welcome their voices, even, maybe especially, when their message challenges us. Listening does not mean agreeing, but to love the neighbour who isn't like us, means to listen to them, because Jesus did. Amen.

³ "Theological Perspective" for Mark Emilie M. Townes. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*– Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2.