

## Rooting for the Widow

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC. Lexington

March 10, 2024

Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash

Mark 12:28-44

28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’ <sup>29</sup>Jesus answered, ‘The first is, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; <sup>30</sup>you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” <sup>31</sup>The second is this, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’ <sup>32</sup>Then the scribe said to him, ‘You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that “he is one, and besides him there is no other”; <sup>33</sup>and “to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength”, and “to love one’s neighbour as oneself”,— this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.’ <sup>34</sup>When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ After that no one dared to ask him any question.

35 While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, ‘How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? <sup>36</sup>David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared, “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.’ ”

<sup>37</sup>David himself calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?’ And the large crowd was listening to him with delight.

38 As he taught, he said, ‘Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, <sup>39</sup>and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! <sup>40</sup>They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.’

41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. <sup>42</sup>A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. <sup>43</sup>Then he called his disciples and said to

them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. <sup>44</sup>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.'

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Bonnie Bednarik is a grandmother in Windsor, Ontario. Her phone rang last year - and it was her grandson. He was in jail, and he needed bail money - thousands of dollars. He was in tears asking for her help, though the connection was a little scratchy. Bonnie told him, give me fifteen minutes to figure out how to get the money, and then call me back. When they were off the phone, Bonnie called the police. She had figured out it was not actually her grandson on the phone - it was a scam. Bonnie and the fraud unit of the police department caught the crooks.<sup>1</sup>

Yes, you can give three cheers for Grandma Bonnie - I love this story because it is one small victory over increasingly frequent and nefarious fraud schemes. This recent pattern of fraud - whether it's by phone, email, or even text - follow two themes. First, the fraudsters figure out an emotional connection and they exploit that to convince good people that they are giving money to an important cause. They "prey on our emotions and our caring nature," said one of the detectives who helped Bonnie catch the crooks.<sup>2</sup> Second - they target particularly vulnerable people. Grandmas, for instance. Older folks. Widows. Or in the case of a scheme that has impacted religious communities around the country including our own - they play on the relationship between clergy and congregant by pretending to be your pastor. (Just a reminder: no staff person at Pilgrim will ever ask you for cash or a gift card.) This kind of fraud makes me so very angry.

And, it sounds a lot like part of the scripture reading this morning.

"Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places...<sup>40</sup>They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

"How do the scribes devour widows' houses?" According to Marcus Borg and John Dominic Cross, "Most likely, the reference is to the scribes' activity as a literate class

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<sup>1</sup> <https://windsorstar.com/news/local-news/windsor-senior-helps-police-foil-grandparent-scam>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/03/04/phone-scammer-canada-grandma/>

working for the wealthy; they would have administered loan agreements and then foreclosed on widows' property when the loan could not be repaid."<sup>3</sup>

We know that widows are pretty important in the Bible. To quote Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan,

"Throughout the Hebrew Bible, widows (along with orphans) are special objects of God's compassion, for, without a man to provide for them, they were the most vulnerable people. Their treatment was a measure of the justice or injustice of the society."<sup>4</sup>

I have a special tenderness for widows and little old ladies - always have. I've known a lot of strong and resilient women with white hair, folks I've looked up to and admired. And so I have always been fond of the final story of today's extended passage - the story of the widow's mite - the widow's *might*. I have preached this passage so often with this woman as the hero of the story. Look what her gift meant to God. Look at her faithfulness. Look at her generosity! These two coins are worth so much! Her gift is praiseworthy!

But this is a season for rereading the text with fresh perspective. In the Narrative Lectionary, this story is told in the same breath as the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself. In the same breath as critique of corrupt temple authorities. And in the very next breath, in chapter 13 of Mark, comes an apocalyptic critique of the whole temple system in the time that Jesus lived. (We'll get there next week.)

With this reading, the widow's gift of her last pennies is not to be celebrated.

"An alternative interpretation hears the passage as a condemnation of the way the poor are manipulated to give all that they have to support the temple. It does not condemn the widow, but the system that leads her to act this way."<sup>5</sup>

The widow has been put in an impossible situation - expected to give to the last two coins she has - Jesus says that "she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." We must wonder if it was to buy the scribes those ornate robes.

Yes - we are rooting for the widow. Yes, we can see her as brave and faithful.

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<sup>3</sup> The Last Week, Kindle Edition

<sup>4</sup> The Last Week, Kindle Edition.

<sup>5</sup> The Last Week, Kindle Edition

But if we root for her, let us root for her in the fight against an oppressive system that would devour her house. Let us root for her to survive in the face of poverty - and ask why she's impoverished in the first place. Let us root for the most vulnerable people to have enough, to be safe, to be secure.

Today's reading began with the two great commandments - a summary of the Torah that Jesus shared with his contemporary rabbis, by the way - to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. The scribe who affirms these priorities - Jesus says to this scribe, you are not far from the kingdom. But the scribes who are committed to a system that takes the last coin from a widow? In his final confrontation with the broken socioeconomic system of the temple of his day, Jesus takes those scribes head on.

In the words of another commentator,

"...Mark is not trying to differentiate Jesus' ministry from the Jewish culture and traditions that inform and animate it. Rather, he is trying to show how the kingdom of God—a thoroughly Jewish idea and movement in Mark's narrative—challenges human power structures for the healing of all people."<sup>6</sup>

In the kingdom of God, no one is exploited. In the kingdom of God, there is enough for all. In the kingdom of God, scribes and widows are equally valued.

And so we come to us - for as followers of the way of Jesus we are kingdom builders.

How do we follow the way? How do we live out both of the great commandments? By building a world that does not oppress the widow, the grandma, the stranger, the traveler, the orphan or any other vulnerable person.

So let us love - love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and with all our strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves.

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/great-commandment-2/commentary-on-mark-1228-44-3>