

“The Value of the Underestimated” based on 1 Kings 17:8-16 and Mark 12:38-44

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on November 7, 2021, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Today’s readings each center on a widow giving a small offering, at least small in the eyes of the world. But for each widow, it is all they have left, the sum of all their wealth, which has now dried up. Yet, what they give, is valued by God above and beyond our expectations.

In the reading from Kings, the widow’s gift keeps the prophet Elijah alive while in hiding, and in Mark, Jesus calls the widow’s gift the largest of all the gifts given that day. But to understand and apply these passages in our lives today, we need to look at the context of these passages and understand a little bit more about the women and who they were.

In the first text, it said that God had commanded this woman to feed Elijah. But in the Hebrew, the word ‘commanded’ can also mean ‘appointed,’ which may fit better, since this woman seems to have no idea what is going on when Elijah comes to her. We are told she is in Zarephath, a town in the Kingdom of Sidon. This is significant because Elijah is on the run in this story. He has just delivered bad news to King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. The Lord, YHWH, was sending a drought to Israel.

You see Jezebel was the daughter of the King of Sidon, who worshipped a god named Baal. Ahab and Jezebel worshipped Baal, built temples to Baal, and they made a sacred pole to Baal in Israel. Scripture tells us Ahab did more to provoke God’s anger than any previous king. This is not a good status to have, because to Elijah, whose name literally means, ‘YHWH (The Lord) is God,’ worshipping Baal is the worst offense.

So, what does Yahweh do? Elijah is protected from a Baal worshiper who is queen in Israel, by being sent to the home of another Baal worshiper in Sidon, a poor suffering widow. Notice that when Elijah asks her for bread, she says, ‘As the Lord your God lives.’ The Lord, Yahweh, is not her god. Baal is. The Lord is Elijah’s god. Yet the Lord provides for her, her son, and for Elijah for many days. Even when the woman’s son dies, God uses Elijah to raise him to life again. It is only then, after both miracles, that the woman comes to acknowledge the Lord as God.

The irony here is rich – Elijah’s prophetic ministry begins with a time in wilderness, just as the people of Israel after Egypt were in the wilderness for 40 years. When they had no food to eat, they were given ‘manna,’ or bread from heaven. So too, the grain and oil in this woman’s pantry never run out, was for Elijah the prophet, like manna, to keep him, the widow and her son alive.

Her simple act of trust, before she even knew it, was a response to the grace of the Lord, who had already appointed her and said she had great value, to share her bread of life with Elijah, miraculous God-given bread, made by a lowly and poor foreign widow ready to die.

In the gospel lesson, we once again see a woman that the world around her underestimates. This scene today comes immediately after last week’s passage with a scribe in it who asks Jesus, ‘What is the greatest commandment?’ The scribe likes Jesus’s answer – love God and love neighbor – and Jesus tells him he isn’t far from the Kingdom of God, referring both to the scribe

being near him as the presence of God's reign, and to the scribe's intellectual understanding, which will bring him closer only through action.

Jesus says immediately after to 'watch out for the scribes,' at least those who desire to dress the part for all to see, who want to be saluted in the markets and given credit for their value in the culture. These scribes want to be given the best seats in the house, be it at a religious gathering, or when they eat with others. Yet, Jesus says these scribes devour the homes of widows, or livelihood of the widows, as the word for house is the same Greek root from which we get the word 'economy.' And the scribes use as their pretext, the long prayers that they pray for all to see. Jesus promises that their judgement will be 'abundant' or 'greater.'

So, what can we learn about the widow by understanding this information about the scribes? In the ancient world, to be a widow was among the hardest lots in life. A widow would either return to her own family, if they purchased her back, or she could stay with and likely work for her late husband's family. But if neither was an option, she was left to beg for her survival. The word translated 'poor' to describe this woman is 'beggar.'

This does not mean we should assume she is a person who has lived her whole life in poverty. She is probably someone who had hopes and dreams. She likely had a decent life with a husband but lost it all when he died. You see, the scribes in this time would often 'help' widows and by help, this means they would be a kind of conservator for widows with no one to care for them, helping them manage whatever resources they had. Of course, this was done for a price.

I'm sure there were scribes that did not exploit this, but often, as we can discern from Jesus pointing it out, there were scribes who devoured the houses, or economies of many widows. This woman may have been a middle-class woman with a loving husband. She continues to go to the temple and give, even though she has nothing to give. She remains devout. She desires to cling to God, who may feel distant to her.

It was not uncommon for others to judge a person like her as sinful, after all, to have a husband die early might be a punishment from God. It might be the result of her husband's in, or even her own. Hebrew scripture teaches that this isn't the case, yet even when the New Testament includes Jesus explicitly saying this is not the case, this remains a popular notion in many churches today. Those that teach that the things we have in life are blessings from God and the things that go bad are punishments. It's just not the case.

Yet, she remains faithful. What she gives is two lepta, two pieces of plain copper, worth too little to bother pressing an image onto it. Combined, they have the value of the smallest coin that Rome bothers to imprint. In our terms, this is may be a few dollars, a half-hour of minimum wage. She is likely not seen, or at least not noticed, by anyone but Jesus. Amid the show, the desire to get recognition by others, she sneaks up to the treasury and drops in her small gift.

By our worldly standards, each of these gifts – a cake of bread and few dollars – don't seem like much. Surely, the operation of the temple could not survive on such small gifts. Nor would it seem like such small cakes were a great meal. Yet, those small cakes were for Elijah what the

manna was to the Israelites, a simple means of survival while he wandered in his version of wilderness. And in the temple, the two lepta were to the God of Israel, the Lord, YHWH, when embodied as a human to live as we live, said they were more valuable than any other gift.

My sisters and brothers, in Mark's gospel, to be a disciple is to devote everything to Jesus. It is to love the Lord with all of our heart, our mind, our soul and our strength, and it is to love our neighbor as ourselves. It is to die to ourselves. This is to lay down our own identities, and pick up our identity in Christ, as beloved children of God. It is by the gift of God in the Son sharing in our humanity, that we are adopted by grace into the family of God to receive the inheritance of the resurrection, which is life, not judgement. It is life that is abundant and eternal.

In this church, and when I say this church, I begin by looking at myself in the mirror, and I see a lot of comfort by worldly standards. There is an interest in using this text often to make people feel guilty. There is plenty of reason for me to look in the mirror and recognize all that I have and feel the guilt that I could be doing more to help those who have less.

Yet, when I think that God came to us to bring life, not judgement, and to deal with sin on the cross through grace, I do not think it is useful to use this text as a tool to judge others or ourselves. I think that if we do that, we miss out the larger message of what God values. You see, there are things we hold up that we think will make us worthy of God's love. We might think, 'Great, I didn't commit that sin today, so God loves me,' or 'O no, I did it again and now God hates me.' We do that a lot. We might say to ourselves, 'O, I didn't give enough to be worthy of being called a Christian,' or say, 'that other person is a wonderful Christian because of all they give.' Maybe we judge someone poorly for not giving.

We use these things for judgement, rather than realizing that God sees the value in each of us regardless of our gifts. It's not that the scribes' gifts are not valuable, or, that the gifts of the wealthy are not valued by God. They are. But they were receiving their value then and there, by jumping around and showing off what they had given to get credit from the people who saw how great they were because of the gifts they gave. They were already getting their reward, as Jesus said in Matthew.

The gift that the widow gives is quiet. As Carol Ann pointed out, the coins the widow put in, didn't make much noise. But they were huge coming from here. There are gifts we give that are quiet. So quiet, we don't know the impact that these gifts are having.

Think of the person who is working as a clerk in a store, and just had a person in front of you say some mean, awful, nasty things. How meaningful is that little gift you give, that you might not have time to give, yet you give all the time you have at that moment to assure the person that they matter and assure them that they are loved by God. Think of the value of that gift.

Think about the way we wrongly think our value comes from our career, what we earn, or what we do right, or what we do well. We don't have to prove anything to anyone because God already loves us. God shared in our human existence, our ever limit and temptation and died

for us, rose again for us. This prepares us to be temples of God's Holy Spirit. We are called to bear God's image in this world and reflect that image to others.

This is to empower you to love others as God has loved you, and empower you to use this love to change the world through the ministry of reconciliation, bringing others to know God's love. Remember, as angry as God was with Israel for its King & Queen who worshiped Baal, it was a widow from Sidon, poor, powerless to change anything, who worshiped Baal, that the Lord, YHWH, Yahweh, the true God, used to witness to Israel, by saving Elijah.

It is easy for us to see evil in this world and assume that someone is evil because they might seem like our enemy, opposed to our God even, but never underestimate God's power to choose them too. Know that God is sovereign and desires salvation, not judgement and condemnation. Likewise, don't underestimate your gift, what you have to give to God's Kingdom.

Maybe you're struggling because you don't know what your role is in life. Maybe you wonder what God has planned for you. Maybe you look around at the Christianity in our country and you wonder, 'is that what I really want to be a part of?' As I said a while back, 'We're on the same team,' but that doesn't mean we can't do things better. We might look around and say, 'Hey, I did this thing God wants really well, doesn't that make me better than that other person.'

There's all kinds of way we can underestimate our value, or the value of another person before God. The truth is that each and every one of you is beloved, not for what you give, but because of who you are. Like these widows, the little things, more than grand gestures, add up and reveal the Kingdom of God, more than you could ever imagine. It is the loving presence we have when we care for others and we give, especially from the things we might be low on ourselves.

When we give because we know it will make a difference in the life of another person, that is what reveals the presence of God in us and among us. This is when we give as God leads us, not for the credit we will receive from others, but in order to show God's love.

At the Distinguished Women Award banquet the other night, where our own Carol Ann Hoard was honored with two other women for their service to the community, a story about one of the other honorees struck me. Terrecia 'Teresa' Wingo goes around our communities with a trunk full of necessary items to give to the homeless. She asked her church to give some items and some handwritten notes with them.

One of the stories that struck me was of a little kid who gave a note. The child didn't know who would receive the note, but wrote a note expressing love and gratitude for a person. Teresa took the note, and she gave it to a homeless person who happened to be planning suicide at that moment. He came back to her later and said that note changed his mind. The man said he knows now that someday he will die, but it won't be by suicide. He said he would always hold on to that note.

That little kid didn't know what they were offering. You don't know what you are offering all the time, but when we give and share what we have to offer, there's no telling the value it has in this world and the difference it will make in revealing God's Kingdom. Amen.