

Sermon: Devotion

New North Church, Hingham

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7 November 2021

Based on **1 Kings 7:8-16; Mark 12:38-44**

When we read the Gospels, we must be careful not to project our own context onto a first-century situation. Sometimes, our first question is not, “What does this passage say?” but, “What am I looking for?” As Jesus said, “Seek and ye shall find.” And we can find all kinds of things in today’s reading.

So, we’ll look at it in two different ways with the understanding that we can only go by what Mark told us.

In the first section, Jesus says, “Beware of the scribes,” presumably *not* including the scribe who had just asked the question about the greatest commandment last week. The ‘long robes’ they wear are festive religious garments intended to impress people. Mark says the scribes want respect, like a bunch of first century Fredo Corleones; they take the best seats in the synagogues; they want places of honor at banquets.

Worst of all, they *devour widows’ houses*, implying that some scribes cheat widows of their property.

In the second section, Jesus sat down and watched many, but not all, rich people put large sums into the treasury, and none put in all they had. Then a poor widow came and put in her two cents, which was all that she had to live on.

In his final public teaching moment, Jesus uses a real-life example to make a point. He gathered his disciples around him and said that all those have contributed out of their abundance; they’ve all taken a little something out of their surplus and offered it to the Temple treasury. The widow, out of her poverty, out of her need, gave everything.

This is the scene Mark presents. In the contrast between the abundance of the rich and the poverty of the widow, are we supposed to wonder, whose devotion is greater? Or should we become angry at the exploitation of the Temple system?

Of the four Gospels, Mark's especially is very political, which makes sense considering it was written either just before or during the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, and he was in Rome when he wrote this.

Torah says to protect the widows and orphans, in Exodus 22 and in Psalm 146, as we saw in our call to worship. There are consequences if you don't (Exodus 22:23-24).

A political reading of this passage says that the entire scribal class is unfit for discipleship; that Jesus condemns the value system that motivates the widow to give all that she has; and that Jesus consistently criticizes the system's exploitation of the poor.

But not everything is about exploitation. In today's reading, the Temple system itself has not necessarily impoverished the widow nor is her story a 'quaint vignette about the superior piety of the poor,' as Ched Myers put it.¹ If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. This is how a political activist reads Mark – everything has a political edge.

Recall Mark's opening line, that this is 'the beginning of the *good news* of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' Maybe Jesus was a political activist, but he was also the Son of God bringing good news. His ultimate focus is on something bigger.

As last week's reading showed, not all scribes are bad. It may be that today's reading means only this particular group of scribes, not all of them everywhere. Either way, Jesus tells us that at least this group of scribes practices a false piety. And as Judaism criticized insincere and ostentatious religious leaders, so does Mark throughout his Gospel.

Today, Mark immediately contrasts the evil of the scribes with an authentic devotion to God by the poor widow. The widow in First Kings was also devoted to God – Elijah's God, not her own – even if it meant that she would die because of the famine.

What famine? The one caused by the three-year drought brought on by Ahab (1 Kings 16:29-17:7), naturally. The LORD sends Elijah to a foreign country, Phoenicia, where *he* becomes the foreigner. He is sent to visit a specific widow for food. She barely has any and is getting ready to die from hunger. But she said, "As the LORD *your* God lives," I'll make a little something. Then I'll die.

But because of her trust in Elijah's God, it doesn't happen; the food doesn't run out. Is *this* why God sent Elijah to her? Keep reading: 'After this,' Scripture says, the

widow's son dies but is revived by Elijah – maybe this is the *real* reason the LORD sent Elijah to the widow, to save her son and show her the power of the LORD.

“Now I know,” she said, that the word of the LORD is truth (1 Kings 17:24).

So, what does Mark's Gospel say? Maybe only that Jesus notices the contrast between rich & poor; many & one; some & all; faith & devotion.

Whose devotion to God, then, is greater? Who is truly serving God here? The rich people won't miss the money they put in, but the widow will. Her gift is for God – her *life* is for God – she gave her whole life, as Jesus soon will. This story speaks of single-minded devotion to God. That's what the Gospel says. Is that what we were looking for when we read it, or does Mark give us an invitation for reflection?

We most often see false piety outside the church setting when, for instance, an athlete or celebrity is caught doing something they ought not to be doing or doing something they thought would remain secret. That's fine; we all make mistakes. But what rubs us the wrong way is when they apologize for getting caught, and not for the awful thing they did. Then it becomes a train wreck, and we can't look away.

We would also like to avoid criticizing those who give from their abundance even when what they give is a fraction of what they hold. Having money, even a lot of money, is not a sin.

So, then, how do we match these readings with our own faith experience?

Both stories tell us something about the cost of discipleship. Following last week's lesson about the two greatest commandments, and knowing what lies ahead for Jesus, are we ready to give the whole of our life to God?

The two widows in today's readings gave everything to God at the risk of losing their lives. Jesus calls us to live in such a way that our offering is truly shared and becomes a blessing for others, and maybe will cost us everything. My feeling is that we'll be sustained by the hope and grace Jesus gives us at the Communion table, just as the widows were sustained by their devotion, and that offering our lives is more powerful and meaningful than we think.

Amen.

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¹ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), 321.