

Mark 12:38-44

Friends, I want to apologize.

I want to apologize for the church, although I don't have any real authority to do so. I'm just one pastor in a pulpit.

So I do believe the church has a lot to answer for, but today I just want to apologize because of the way this Gospel passage has been used. I mean that over and over we hear this story about the widow and her minuscule offering as a means to shake down congregations during stewardship season, during which this lectionary reading conveniently occurs. "Look," preachers have said, in subtle ways and more blatant ones, "this widow gives all that she has. Can't you cough up a little more?"

This move is both cynical and sensational, and almost certainly not what Jesus would do. Let me tell you: if all you have is two pennies, I promise that the Temple does not need your money. Even if you have more than two pennies, no one needs you to bankrupt yourself on behalf of the church. I don't even think the compensation committee is going to yell at me for that one.

Yes, Jesus praises the widow's generosity and her trust—what he says in the original Greek is "she has given her whole life"—we're always called to share from what we have. But he is not here pointing to some "how low can you go" competition in sacrificial giving, but rather the hypocrisy of religious and economic insiders in the apparatus that made the widow poor in the first place.

If there is one thing that is consistent throughout scripture, Old and New Testament alike, it is a care for widows and orphans, threaded through Torah and the words of the prophets. God makes clear God's care for those who have fallen outside of the family systems and other frameworks of mutual care. And yet here this care has turned to neglect and exploitation: "They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers."

Here's the thing, right? The system already demands more from people of small means than it does from the wealthy. Maybe you've heard of the Boots Theory of economic unfairness. It goes like this: a wealthy person

smacks down \$100 without thinking for a pair of boots that will last a decade, while a poor person, who can only afford a \$20 pair of boots, will have to replace them once a year. In the end they'll have spent \$200 over the same timeframe and still have wet feet. Poor people pay more for transportation, groceries, housing, and more. These issues are not really a credit to people living in poverty—"hey, good for you for paying your rent!"—but an indictment of a society that lets these conditions persist.

And, you know, the voice is coming from inside the house. We know that religion is too often distorted to camouflage or justify injustice, selfishness, and apathy. Jesus alerts us here to this capacity for distortion and at the same time calls us to practice our faith with genuine generosity.

But if you're already feeling a little bruised and battered today, maybe wondering about your own complicity in these systems as I am, let me remind you that the opposite of poverty is not wealth. The opposite of poverty is justice. And there is room for all of us, from every walk of life, to work together for that.

Immediately before this gospel passage, Jesus praises a scribe who understands the virtues of loving God and loving neighbor. He says to Jesus, "to love [God] with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself"—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

So when scribes in their long robes are blamed for exploiting widows and the least of these, we understand that it's not religion itself that is to blame. This is important because it suggests that we, the religious insiders if you will, have freedom in how we respond to calls to justice. We're not constrained by what others are doing or failing to do. We don't need to point fingers at other scribes or fall into false equivalencies. We can keep our eyes on the road, loving God with everything we have and loving our neighbors with a fierce and unshakable love.

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It may be instructive to pair this narrative with the other widow story in our readings this week, the widow at Zarephath, a Gentile and a foreigner, far away from the halls of power. She is absolutely at the end of her rope. The drought that has produced famine in the land has also stolen her resilience, and there is nothing left for her but despair. In fact Michael Chan says she

is “laboring under a death sentence,” preparing a meal for herself and her son out of the very last of their resources.

It seems at first like a callous perversion of the story of the generous widow. God commands Elijah to go to her with the assurance that she will feed him. Feed him with what, exactly? Was she consulted about sharing her final meager meal with a stranger? And, maybe more importantly to her, robbing her son of all she can give him? But it is precisely in this realm of impossibility that God prepares to act.

And with unwavering faith in God’s promises, Elijah talks crazy talk. In the face of obvious scarcity, he assures the widow of God’s abundance. To her deep despair and resignation, he maintains that God will provide. And hearing about her preparations for death, he brings an improbable word of faith: “Do not be afraid ... but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son.”

Elijah’s words, however bizarre they must sound, invite the widow to participate in a new reality that God’s promises are creating, although they are currently hidden from view. “For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.” God will provide the widow and her son the means to survive this terrible drought.

Here’s Chan again: “Once condemned to hunger, death, and suffering, the widow is given a new word that nullifies her original death sentence. Death is swallowed up in promise, despair in hope.”

So even on days that it’s raining and prospects seem dim, in the face of a dire diagnosis or an uphill battle, we proclaim that God can make a way where there seems to be no way. God’s consistent work in Christ is to shatter the power of death and bring new life where lifelessness seems to have the upper hand.

Jesus asks us here not so much to emulate the widow but to join in the project of caring for the vulnerable and overturning the systems that have kept them that way. As the song says, “You have cast the mighty down from their thrones and uplifted the humble of heart; you have filled the hungry with wondrous things and left the wealthy no part.”

In answer, we can courageously give ourselves to more fully participate in God's countercultural work. We can take hope from the witness of scripture that God's just and merciful will will be done. We can live into the new reality that God's promises are creating, although they are currently hidden from view. Amen.