

## The Generous Widow: The Need to Give

Mark 12: 38-44

October 20, 2019

Before our story of the generous Widow for today, Jesus has just returned to Jerusalem and he ends up in a public debate with the most respected and honored figures of his time. One after another the chief priest, scribes, elders, Herodians, Pharisees, Sadducees, challenge him with questions to trap him. One after another, like in a tennis match, Jesus returns the volley.

Finally a scribe comes forward. A Scribe was a Torah scholar who interpreted and preserved the law. This scribe asks, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus responds, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. A second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself." After that, everyone sees that Jesus is on his game, and no one dares to ask him any more questions.

Jesus, though, isn't done. He starts teaching in the temple, and he goes on offense and challenges the respected and honorable ones. "Beware of the scribes," he says, "they walk around in long robes, like to be greeted in the marketplace and have the best seats at the banquets, for the sake of appearances say long prayers (don't think I'm not paying attention). And 'they devour widow's houses.'" Jesus is saying the respected and honorable ones are profiting off of the poor.

Then while Jesus is sitting down opposite the treasury watching the the crowd putting in thier money, he sees many rich people put in large sums and then the widow puts in two copper coins, everything she has.

Scholar Richard Swanson says that "the widow in this scene acts as a parable." Scholar Amy Jill-Levine says "that what makes parables mysterious, or difficult, is that they challenge us to look into the hidden aspects of our own values, our own lives. They bring to the surface unasked questions, and they reveal the answers we have always known, but refuse to acknowledge. Our reaction to them should one of resistance rather than acceptance."

If you don't like this story of the generous widow and would rather not think about what this means for your life, that's fine, because that's probably how everyone else feels too. And yet, these parables, these stories are at the center of Jesus' teaching. So we can't avoid them.

It may be hard for us to recreate how strange it is for the widow to be held up as the "she-ro" in a story like this. Sara and I have been watching the series Downton Abby again, the story of the Earl of Grantham, his families and his servants and the realities of class and change before and after World War 1 in England. In a series of episodes there is a servant who has a child out of wedlock, she is dismissed, she is forced into prostitution to care for her child. Then one of the characters who likes to stir things up and wants to help this

woman rebuild her life, invites her back to work. The servants and the nobles and the townspeople are shunning her. One servant is reminded that Jesus dined with prostitutes and this servant can't bring himself to believe that could be true.

The widow isn't a prostitute, but the examples that Jesus regularly holds up are shocking. The widow is in one of the forgotten groups that the Bible has to regularly remind people to care for. "Remember the orphan. Remember the widow. Remember the immigrant. Be compassionate towards them."

This forgotten one is the one who gets it. On Downton Abby, it is always shocking when it is one of the lower classes is proven wiser than the nobles. I'm imagining this is true in the first century Roman Empire too. The widow is praised, and the valueless one, who is taken advantage of, is the one to look up to, not honorable respected leaders. The Realm of God is embodied, we can see it. The last become first. The valueless becomes valuable. The widow gives her whole self to God and others just like the great commandment says. She understands the need to give and the need to be a part of this generous life and she shows that to us.

Jesus gives us an example of an outrageously generous life to illustrate a core value of the way of the faith: giving of oneself. Jesus teaches this in a parable. We may resist here, that's expected. Jesus wants to create tension.

I'm always interested in social scientific study of religious practices and their benefits. I'm interested in the studies of prayer and meditation and giving and generosity too.

In their book *The Paradox of Generosity: Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose*, authors Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson professors at Notre Dame write that "Generosity is Paradoxical. Those who give, receive back in return. By giving ourselves away, we ourselves move towards flourishing. It is not only philosophical or religious teaching, it is sociological fact." They go on to unpack their studies of people who volunteer, who practice "relational or neighborly generosity - people who make themselves physically or emotionally available to others," and those who tithe, who give 10% of their income. Their studies show that people who give generously of themselves in these ways are happier. Not only does giving contribute to "the good." Our giving contributes to what is good for us. Giving is important for our spiritual health.

When I was growing up, I remember there being a check on the table twice a month on Sunday mornings when I sat down to eat my Honey Nut Cheerios. One day, I picked one of these checks and looked at it. It was a check for the church, and it was a lot of money. I thought about the toys I could buy for myself with that money. I went to the toy section in every store that had one. I knew what the toys I wanted cost. I confronted my dad about this and he explained to me that my parents tithed, they gave 10% of their income to

the church. They didn't always, my dad said. There was a time when they were first married that they didn't tithe, but it didn't feel right to them. It didn't feel good. So they worked their way up to that practice.

I've shared before that Sara and I have had similar practice. When we were parents with young children, we had some health issues in our family that were draining our resources. We pulled back from our giving practice. As we've lived and worshipped here, we have been inspired by the generosity of this congregation both now and throughout its history, and we started growing our giving towards the modern tithe - giving 10% of one's income to those places where we see God at work in the world, with the church being at the center. We now give 10% of our income.

The process of growing our giving has been an important spiritual practice like any other spiritual practice. As we are in the midst of our annual stewardship campaign, if this is the right time for you, I invite you to consider growing your giving as one important part of the spiritual life.

I am proud of the many ways this church gives.. The ways we are giving ourselves to one another and the world.

Recently, I sat down to write my Ministry Report for the Council, a monthly summary of all that is happening in our ministry. I was surprised again at all that is happening.

I wrote about our Connect groups. We have two groups meeting on Wednesday nights and one is an intentionally family-friendly multigenerational group. A Sunday morning group has started too. On Wednesday, I was asking people, "how was Connect?" One person said, "its so deep, it's just like your center is opened up and the conversation goes right into your heart." Another said, "it's amazing. I've been looking for a group like this for 20 years. I'm so glad I've found it." Like with our children's faith formation, Connect is lay led. Pastor Lauren supports the leaders, but pastors don't lead it.

The Our Whole Lives classes for middle schoolers, a comprehensive sexual health and healthy relationships curriculum, is beginning again with a parent meeting Wednesday. Pastor Lauren will be leading OWL along with two new adult leaders. When it comes to ministry with youth in the 21st century when youth are so busy and the church is not an ultimate concern, we can struggle to get a group gathered. Not with OWL. We have 23 middle schoolers signed up. 23! You will be giving the gift of healthier, safer relationships to our young people.

Our Sanctuary Team has been having many conversations and there will be another after worship today if you would like to join us. The Sanctuary discussion has been difficult, and there has been the feeling on the team that besides making a statement, our efforts have not been having the sort of impact in supporting the immigrant community in Northfield that we would like. So the team is exploring relationships with organizations at the border in El Paso and Arizona to see how we can support the lifesaving work that is happening there. The team is exploring ways that we can give of our time to support children of immigrant families at Greenvale Community School, the Middle School, and the High School, not just as individuals, but as a community. This new direction is very hopeful to me.

Our ISAIAH ministry is going very strong, and our church is at the center of ISAIAH's work statewide. Chuck Follen will say more about that in a few minutes.

Our support for Our Church's Wider Mission, the support for the United Church of Christ and its ministry of a just world for all, remains as generous as any church in the conference.

There's all kinds of other ministry too: choir, coffee hour, special functions, faith formation, care ministry, knitters, women's group, men's group, boards and committees, the list goes on. Not bad for a church in the midst of pastoral transition, but the church depends on you. And you are giving so much of your time, energy, and treasure to make this ministry happen.

There's a quote from the Buddha that goes like this, "if you knew what I knew about the power of giving, you would not let a single meal pass without sharing it in some way." Sounds similar to what Jesus said, and the widow embodied, "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." We are invited to deepen a life of generosity. That deepening is happening here, and it is a beautiful sight. Amen.