

TWO SIDES OF A COIN

As [Jesus] taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 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. 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."

Mark 12: 38-44

Last Sunday I'm sure many of you filled a large bowl with all kinds of treats to hand out to the kids who came to your door dressed up as monsters, super-heroes, princesses, and various animals.

I won't ask for a show of hands, but what I want to know is this: how many of you arranged the candy in your bowl so that the pieces you like best—the Almond Joys or the Three Musketeers—were on the bottom, so that if there was anything left over, you knew what it would be. Or, how many of you every year overestimate how many trick-or-treaters will visit your door, and buy an extra bag of candy, guaranteeing that there will be something to treat yourself with when the kids have all gone.

Even if your Halloween strategy is beyond reproach, let's be honest—we all find ways of keeping a little something back for ourselves, don't we? Even in our most generous moments, we usually take the approach of being in, but not all the way in, of wanting to reserve a bit for us. Alyce McKenzie, who teaches at Perkins School of Theology, remembers a scene in the movie "The Alamo," where Col. William Travis is giving a speech to his small band of volunteers trying to defend this outpost against the massive army of Mexico. He tells them they are outnumbered, their chances of survival are slim, and he would not hold it against anyone if they took the opportunity to make a hasty retreat. But then he draws a line in the dirt with his sword and invites all those who choose to stay and fight with him to cross over the line. And Alyce McKenzie says, "I'm afraid I might have been one foot over, one foot back, getting out my iPhone to check my calendar, [and] saying something like, 'I'll see if I can stay. I think I may have a conflict and may need to leave for a while, but I might be able to come back tomorrow, if you really need me.'"

Whether it is in giving ourselves, giving our love, or giving our gifts, we often find it hard to be all in. We find it more comfortable to hold back a little, or to straddle that line with one foot in but the other foot out.

If you read through the gospels, you may notice that the people Jesus encounters and invites to follow him illustrate a variety of levels of commitment. The rich young man who went away sad because he had so many possessions—he was all out. James and John, who wanted to be in positions of power and prestige—they were in provided their conditions were met.

But others—and often in Mark it is those who are the least powerful and most neglected—others, like the poor widow in our reading today, show us what it's like to be all in. And what is noteworthy in this story is that it's not the amount of her giving that is important to Jesus. There were others who gave much more money than the widow, probably more in their one gift that she had given over a lifetime. So it's not so much the

dollar amount that is important in this story—it's the spirit in which she gives. It gets to that paradox of the Christian faith that says you find life not by keeping it or holding on to it, but only by giving it away. You find yourself in the very act of giving yourself away—in whatever way you can.

But for all we can learn about extravagant giving from this story—there is another side to this coin. There is another angle on this story that we may not have seen at first.

The disciples are strolling around the magnificent complex known as Herod's Temple, and I can imagine them like Oklahoma farm boys walking through Times Square for the first time, marvelling at the jaw-dropping sights.

And just as the disciples are thinking that this looks like something they could get used to—Jesus sees something out of the corner of his eye, something that apparently is invisible to everyone else. And this invisible thing that suddenly appears to Jesus leads him to remark that the same scribes who try to impress everyone with their long and eloquent prayers, also line their pockets with foreclosures on poor widows, and he shatters the disciples' daydreams of fame and fortune.

And still, no one has noticed what Jesus is seeing, so he leads them over to a vantage point just opposite the treasury, and he watches intently without saying a word. At first all they see are a few good folks proudly contributing large sums to the temple, even though it hardly needs more money. These are the ones the world notices; these are the ones whose picture will be on the front page of tomorrow's paper, shaking hands with mayor while presenting an oversized cardboard check for some impressive figure.

But then, again, Jesus speaks, and draws our attention to something we had missed. It's not that we didn't see her. We saw her drop her two little coins in the collection box, but we didn't pay it much notice. It is as if we saw through her; it is as if she were invisible. But when Jesus says, "This poor widow has put in more than anybody else today," suddenly an invisible thing becomes visible, and it is not a thing—it is a person.

Every other year or so, usually around stewardship campaign time, she is brought out of the shadows again and we hear this story of how this poor widow gave her last two coins and how Jesus praises her above those who gave much larger sums. And so we all feel guilty about how much—or how little—we are giving to the church, we tell ourselves we really should do better, and we may even act on our guilt and increase our giving by a bit.

And that is not a *bad* reading of this story.

But when we sentimentalize this woman's poverty, when we moralize about her sacrificial giving, when we reduce this story to nothing more than a scolding about stewardship, we may miss what is an even larger issue at work in this scene.

It is no accident that what Jesus asks the disciples and the crowd to see is a poor widow. Throughout the Old Testament, widows, orphans and aliens have represented the vulnerable, the dispossessed, those exploited by the powerful and wealthy. And they occupy a special place in the heart of God. And it is also no accident that this episode in Mark's Gospel is set in the temple, this impressive, opulent structure that illustrates how even a religious institution can define itself in terms of wealth, privilege, and power.

By juxtaposing these two images, the powerful and privileged and the poor and powerless, Jesus may have been remembering a song that Mary his mother sang when he was growing up, the song she sang just before he was born, that song that announces that with the birth of the Messiah the world is about to change— "[The Lord] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." This is not a song about the poor receiving a charitable handout from the rich, this is a song and a prophecy that calls into question the social and economic power arrangements that contribute to a widow having only a couple of copper coins to give.

When Jesus compels us to pay attention to the poor widow, it is not just about emulating her sacrificial giving (although that is evident). It is not just about scolding the scribes or the wealthy donors so that they feel guilty and in a sudden fit of reluctant charity share some of their surplus wealth with this poor widow (although that would be commendable). More than either of these, this story is about seeing the widow for her own sake. It is about seeing her as an equal partner in the community of faith and in the community of the world. What it requires, first of all, is a conversion of vision, of how we see others; what it leads to, in the end, is a change in power arrangements.

And it raises the question: Who is it that we need to notice and make visible in our own communities? This story calls us to ask: How would our church be different if it were shaped by the needs of outsiders rather than insiders, by the poor in our community, by the most vulnerable and exploited ones?

These are large questions, and they not easily answered. Maybe they are like the clothes my mother used to buy for me at the beginning of a school year. They were usually one or two sizes larger than what I needed, and when I would point this out to my mother, she would invariably reassure me, “You’ll grow into them.” Maybe we will have to grow into these large questions of how we go about the systemic and structural changes that the gospel calls us to.

In the meantime, we can begin with a change of vision and perception. One that sees both sides of the coin—the example of sacrificial giving, but also the conditions that contribute to poverty. And then maybe we can start seeing the widow as Jesus saw her.

May it be so.