

How can we become like the widow?

Mark 12:41-44

Friends in Christ, this morning we will meditate in the gospel lesson for today specifically verses 41 to 44. Let us hear one more time these verses: **41 And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. 42 And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. 43 And he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. 44 For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."**

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Dear fellow Redeemed:

This text is a familiar and simple scene in the gospel of Mark. It is the season of Passover. From cities all around the ancient world the children of Israel are going to Jerusalem to celebrate this great festival. The city is filled with people. The focus of worship is the great temple on Mount Zion, which overshadows the rest of the city.

Jesus also enters that city with His disciples. As he comes down the road, crowds gather around Him. They have heard about this rabbi from Nazareth. Now he comes to that city, the center of religious and political power. Each day He teaches in the temple. Much of His teaching is in the courtyard of the Gentiles, the outer precinct of the temple. There the sellers of sacrifices and the changers of money create a swirl of activity surrounding the temple.

So one day Jesus goes into the next court, the court of the women, where Israelite women were permitted to worship. He looks around this courtyard and sees 13 chests scattered about the area. At each of them there is a large receptacle with a trumpet-shaped opening on top called the shofar chest, the trumpet chest. One is for the temple dues that are overdue.

The one next to it is for temple dues for this year. If you want to add to the gold on the mercy seat, which sits secluded in the most holy place, you can put something in the box for the mercy seat. If you would like to offer a sacrifice, there is a box for that. If you would like to add to the supply of wood, you may give to that. And if you would like to buy some incense to be used in the temple, there is still another box for that.

The other six chests are labeled "Free Will Offering" and are used by the temple officials to help the needy in Jerusalem and the land of Israel. Because this is an annual pilgrimage for most of the Israelites, there is a steady stream of pilgrims going to this place, selecting the chests and placing their large offerings for the year in the boxes. All these is happening and there comes a woman.

Quietly she moves among all the people. She reaches a box labeled "Free Will Offering" and holds out her hand containing two thinly shaved copper coins, each worth about one-eighth of a cent. She turns her hand over and drops these two coins into the neck of the trumpet. She might have continued her journey unnoticed had not our Lord said something. He called His disciples together. He said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box."

I am sure the disciples were amazed, as you and I would have been. Jesus' words do not compute in our accounting system. Two thinly shaved pieces of copper worth about a fourth of a cent are more than all the other coins in the box? God's accounting is certainly different from ours. The point of the story is obvious, and Jesus goes on to make it. An old English version puts it in such an interesting way. He said that everybody else gave "out of their superfluity."

Do we have superfluity? Yes, we do. We have it in the closet, in the kitchens with plenty of food inside the cabinets and fridges, and most of the time we throw this food in the garbage because the due date has passed. We have it in the basement, in the garage and up in the attic. It is made up of all those things we really do not need. Another name for it is "stuff." Everyone else gave from the resources of their superfluous stuff.

In our text Jesus said about this woman “she has put in everything she had.” It was all there in the palm of her hand, everything she owned, all her living. She turned it upside down and dropped it into the shofar chest.

The greatest gift is the gift that costs us the most. And by those standards Jesus’ accounting was correct. The point of the story is obvious. The application to our lives is more difficult. How can we become more like her? As we think of its meaning for us, one of our questions is what motivated this woman? What made her that kind of giving person? If we can learn the secret of her freedom to give, then we might become God’s giving people.

This morning we focus our attention on three aspects of this woman’s life which might help us understand her. **First of all**, to be a giving person we must have a level of understanding of the needs of other people. This woman was a widow. In Jesus’ day there were no survivor benefits, pensions and benefit plans, or Social Security. In the Old Testament widows and orphans were particularly protected by the law. Israel was reminded to remember them and not forget their needs. She was a person who understood what it meant to be a widow in need.

Now, that may sound unnecessarily obvious to us who are not widowed. But those who experience it remind us that without facing it we cannot fully understand it. That is true of many of our human situations. We can talk about facing surgery or facing a family crisis, but living through it is another matter.

To be a giving person requires a certain level of experience and maturity. If you and I are having trouble becoming giving persons, perhaps it is because we are immature. Perhaps it is because we are still little children emotionally who think that life owes us only pleasure and happiness without any pain. This woman was a giving person because she understood what it means to be in need.

However, understanding is not enough. We have all known people who have gone through tough times and have become cynical and bitter. They wrap themselves in a mantle of self-pity and take out their bitterness on other people. Their hearts can become like stone. It takes more than an understanding mind to be a giving person. It is obvious from this story that this woman also had **a heart of compassion**. The word compassion is one that is used frequently in the teaching of Jesus. In the Hebrew culture they believed that your emotions were in the stomach. That is where you felt, they thought. When the Old Testament talked about people who felt for others, they spoke of “the bowels of compassion,” in the very center of our being.

Today we use the term heart. For us it is the symbolic center of compassion. If you and I are struggling with stone hearts and wondering if it is possible in a cynical, self-centered world to feel any kind of compassion, we can turn to the Holy Bible and discover where our hearts can find compassion. Children learn from their parents, for better or worse. And there are clever commercials that remind us that boys and girls look up to their parents and often do what they do and live as they live. In a similar and yet more profound way, we Christians have a model for the compassionate heart in the Father who loves us in Jesus Christ.

One time Jesus’ disciples came to Him and asked Him “How many times do I have to forgive my brother? Is seven times enough?” Jesus said, “Seventy times seven.” That is God’s strange mathematics. We wonder where such thoughts come from. The answer Jesus gives us is a parable about the king who forgave a great debt, pointing to the God who has taken away the sin of the world.

In the cross and resurrection of his Son, He offers us His heart of compassion. He knows we have nothing to offer to Him. He does not sit there with His celestial computer adding up the good things we have done or subtracting the bad things. He simply says, “I love you. I love the world so much that I gave my only Son.” It is that heart of the compassionate Father that enables us to have hearts of compassion. God does not create such hearts with the harsh wind of His threats, but He lets the bright sun of His love and forgiveness shine upon us. Our hearts of stone are warmed and they become flesh again. Like the widow, not only do we understand the needs of others, but we begin to care.

Finally, there is that **third essential element**. This widow could well have understood the needs of others, she could

well have felt compassion for them, but she still had to walk over, open her hand and let all she had go. That, of course, is the final step—a **mind that understands, a heart that cares, and a hand that gives**.

Could we have done what she did? Do we still believe that the abundance of our lives somehow can be measured in the things we possess? If we do, then a tragedy touches us. As long as my hand holds tightly to the things that I possess as if they were my own, there is another hand that reaches from these possessions and holds my heart tightly.

A while ago I read the experience of a man who left Eastern Europe as a refugee. He described his experience of locking the door of his home and taking only the key with him. That was all. He knew that once he crossed the border, he would lose everything he owned. Can we even imagine what kind of action that must have been? Yet in a real sense we cannot be giving persons until, with this widow, we put everything into the hands of Him who really does own them. For we are not owners; we are caretakers. We move these things around and rearrange them. We put them away and take them out for 30, 50, or 70 years. Then our treasures become someone else's trash.

Life moves on. When we open our hands as the widow did and let go, then the hand of our possessions begins to loosen its grip on our hearts. We can begin to make choices and decisions with people in mind, rather than things. We can respond to the needs of others. We can discover the purpose of our lives as God's people.

The invitation of God is full and free. He is eager to give us understanding, compassion, and the freedom to give. Lord, renew our minds, our hearts, and our hands through Your Word and Sacraments. Amen

The peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen