

**November 11, 2018**

**Mark 12: 38-44**

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, we are grateful to be in your presence in this worship space. Go with us now into the study of your word as preserved by your servant Mark. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

### **Lost in Translation**

When the gospel writers wrote their stories of Jesus, they were writing in an ancient, agricultural society. So it makes sense that many of the stories and illustrations came out of that world.

Our task as readers and followers of Christ is to grasp the meaning even when our metaphors, our life experiences, are different.

Take for instance, the importance of the shepherds in our Christmas stories. As anyone who has worshiped with us over a Christmas season knows I am obsessed with the shepherds. Because I don't know about you, but I lived for nearly 50 years without ever meeting a shepherd.

Then I met a reporter from Texas who had done a Christmas story on modern-day shepherds. That struck me as a great idea. I vowed to steal it immediately.

I was no longer working for *The Greenville News*, so I called the *Greenville Journal* and said, *Do I have a story for you -- looking at Christmas through the eyes of modern-day shepherds.*

The editors said, "Oh, that *is* good." So I located three sheep farms in Laurens County and Travelers Rest and interviewed the owners, trying to get at some of the issues behind our Savior being born amid a bunch of shepherders.

It turned out that while Texas might have shepherds, we in South Carolina have sheep and we have sheep farmers. But the closest thing we have to shepherds are the courageous, stout-hearted dogs who tend the sheep.

The sheep farmers told about putting an Anatolian shepherd puppy into the barn to be raised by ewes. As the dog grew, it became very protective of his mother sheep, then transferred that protectiveness to the entire flock.

One farmer told about his dog facing down an entire pack of coyotes until he could get there with his gun.

One told me how his dog chose the highest spot in the pasture and lay in watch the entire night as the sheep slept.

One showed me border collies that ran tirelessly to gather stragglers into the fold.

It was an interesting way to explore the ancient story of human shepherds who were the first to welcome our Lord Jesus.

In the same way that reporters are always looking for new twists on holiday stories, preachers are always trying to bring context to biblical stories. Because so often, we 21<sup>st</sup> century church-goers have little connection to the people who first heard and read these stories. The meaning can get *lost in translation*.

For most churches, that's the case with today's Scripture passage. It is a story you probably heard in Sunday school, a story known as the widow's mite. The lectionary schedules it when most churches hold their stewardship seasons.

If you grew up in church, you probably had this widow held up as the poster child for giving: *She gave all that she had to live on. We want you to do the same, so hand it over.*

So although the people in most of our churches have little concept of the poverty of this widow, she does, at least, provide a role model for what sacrificial giving looks like.

But as with many stories, this one resonates *a little differently* at Triune. 1) Because we don't have stewardship sermons. 2) Because the widow lives in this congregation.

*The widow lives in this congregation.*

Every single Sunday some of our offering envelopes are filled with nickels and pennies. People living in our shelters or in the woods faithfully give dollar bills.

People here understand the widow's poverty.

Her poverty, her powerlessness, and yes, her generosity, are played out here every single day.

At the same time, this passage is about so much more than the widow's offering. It's about an economic system that mandates her poverty. An economic system that is very much with us today.

Please turn in your Bibles to **Mark 12: 38-44**, and let's read together. Here's a clue that something beyond the widow's offering is afoot: Notice how long it takes before she makes an appearance.

38 As he taught, (Jesus) said, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, <sup>39</sup>and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor

at banquets! <sup>40</sup>They *devour widows' houses* and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'

41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums.

<sup>42</sup>A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. <sup>43</sup>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. <sup>44</sup>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.'

Perhaps the most important part of this story is something we can't see from this passage: Its placement. Mark places it in the temple in Jerusalem at the very end of Jesus's ministry.

Jesus is moving in and out of the temple, arguing with the religious authorities. He has already turned over the moneychangers' tables, thereby challenging the livelihood of those who made their living in the temple.

He is exposing the temple and its authorities as corrupt. It will not be the center of the new order, of the coming kingdom of God.

He's showing the contrast between corrupt worship and authentic worship by pointing out both types going on all around them. He is teaching by showing. And so he points to some of them and begins:

**“Beware 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 synagogues and places of honor at banquets.”**

These are respected, respectable leaders he’s talking about. He is undermining the authority of the temple’s royalty. He is pointing out the hollowness of their religion.

And why does he think their religion is hollow? They don’t help the poor. **“They devour widows’ houses....”**

In a nutshell, Jesus is charging them with hypocrisy. And the proof for him comes in the fact they don’t care for the poor. **“They devour widows’ houses....”**

There are political implications here. There are socioeconomic implications here. We know that because it still happens today. Our tax policies and our gentrification *devour widows’ houses*. Quite literally. *The Greenville News* carried a story this week about a woman over 100 years old who had been relocated from her house.

The huge and growing divide between rich and poor not only threaten our nation’s stability. It threatens its morality.

Jesus does not shy away from confronting the abusive powers of his day. He accuses them of abusing the poor.

And he is completely upfront: The systemic economic system on which this temple is grounded is corrupt. **“They devour widows’ houses....”**

Then and only then does Mark pivot and tell a second story about precisely the person the scribes are abusing – an impoverished widow.

Jesus parks his disciples so they can see the collection box in the temple court, and has them watch the traffic for awhile. They are able to tell when rich people put in large sums. They are able to tell when the poor widow comes in.

And what does she do?

She **“put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”**

With this story placed on the eve of Jesus’ execution, Mark is probably commenting on his upcoming death. Jesus was preparing to give everything he had to live on.

So in one sense, this widow was a precursor, a harbinger, a living metaphor. She gave **“all she had to live on.”**

But on a more literal level, Jesus – and his biographer Mark -- are giving us two ways of going about worship, one showy and empty, one quiet and meaningful.

I can’t ever read this passage without remembering a time when I was visiting someone in the hospital. It was a semi-private room, and the person I was visiting was near the window. We finished our visit and I had to walk past the other patient’s bed to get to the door.

Just as I reached the foot of his bed, *his* visiting pastor said, “Let us pray.”

So I froze and stood politely for his prayer. And stood. And stood.

This guy did not let up. I stood there for a good four minutes and he showed no signs of stopping. I finally tiptoed out. For all I know, he may still be praying in that poor man’s room.

A prayer that long was not for the benefit of a sick man in the hospital. It was “**for the sake of appearance.**” And Jesus condemns it.

This is the part of the story I think we can sometimes lose in the rush to place the widow on her stewardship poster. These people uttering their long prayers for show were not the ones who understood the new way Jesus was offering, the new way that Bartimaeus and others had grasped.

Jesus was repudiating the temple. It was no longer to be the center of religious authority. And yet, the widow gave all she had to this same temple. And from what we can tell, Jesus sincerely praised her for it.

Is this a comment on the widow as victim of an unjust economic system? Yes.

Is this a comment on the widow’s sacrificial generosity? Yes.

To see both angles of the story does not diminish the truth of either.

Sometimes I am struck by how closely our experiences at Triune mimic stories in Scripture. *Because this widow lives among us.*

As our ushers take up the offering on Sunday mornings, I see people standing to empty their pockets of crumpled bills. I see them running after the ushers to put all their change in the offering pouches.

Many of those pockets leave here empty.

Over the years I have saved some precious notes that came in our offering plate. One from 2006 was on a torn piece of notebook paper. It said, *I have no money but you have all my prayers and thanks for all you do for me. May God be with you.*

One from a 9-year-old girl said, *Thank you for preaching. I like it.*

A man requested that I tell *more of the man Jesus, his death and shed blood for people like me and more of his power to help drunks like me.*

You can see why going through the offering pouch is one of my favorite things to do – whether there's much money in there or not.

People in this place live out this story of the widow at every single worship service. Its meaning is not lost in translation.

For some reason that is really never spelled out, the God of our Scripture has a preference for the poor. We see that over and over and over again.

We see it in Old Testaments laws about caring for the orphan and the widow and the alien.

We see it in New Testament parables that warn against hoarding grain in barns.

We see it when Jesus says it is more difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God than it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.

We see it in the Sermon on the Mount.

We see it when Jesus tells the rich young ruler to sell all he has and give it to the poor, then follow him.

That is why I'm here. I want to be standing next to Jesus's beloved when he comes again.

At the moment this little story of the widow ends, Jesus leaves the temple for the last time.

Then he turns around to look at the magnificent structure and says, **“Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all this will be thrown down.”**

(Mark 13: 2)

In the kingdom of God, the temple and its self-important scribes who take advantage of the poor will be *thrown down*.

His new kingdom will have nothing to do with self-serving predators who used the temple to gain status and wealth. Instead, it is their victim, the lowly widow, who is held up as an example of kingdom living. Because she gave **“all she had to live on.”**

As Jesus heads to the cross, Mark is speaking once more about the high cost of discipleship. This widow is offering her life, and it’s the only sacrifice Jesus is interested in.

As he has done so often in this gospel, Jesus was turning the concept of the kingdom of God on its head. Everyone thought that the scribes in their long robes and their important seats and their places of honor were the first tier of God’s people.

But they weren’t. It was the widow who gave everything she had to live on.

That’s a story that doesn’t get lost in translation.

Amen.