

This is a wonderful gospel lesson, and so rich in interpretive possibilities. When we read this text with our old testament lesson, we see common refrain about a widow, who gives everything she has. In the story with Elijah, she shares all that she has to eat, and consequently she and her son, as well as Elijah, have more than enough to survive.

In the gospel reading, the poor widow contributes all she has to the Temple treasury. And Jesus see's her, he honors her by saying she has contributed more than all the others.

Traditionally, these lessons are yoked together and suggest a definite preaching path, going in the direction of stewardship and giving. Which are important things to lift up! This morning I'd like to work with the gospel reading, keeping it in context with the Passion week.

Jesus enters Jerusalem with shouts of Hosanna, the next day he goes to the temple and overturns the money changers tables. His authority is questioned, he tells the parable of the wicked tenant's, where the religious people realize he's speaking against them and they want to arrest him, but they are afraid of the crowds. Then the religious professionals try to outsmart him with questions about paying taxes and resurrection, they want him discredited.

The whole passion week is about the confrontation between Jesus and the religious professionals. Our reading for today is squarely part of that conflict. Jesus denounces the scribes as people who defraud the poor. In fact, the exact language Jesus uses is— "devour the widows' houses." Jesus is accusing the scribes of caring for themselves and not for the most vulnerable among them- the Widows.

Having spent many years involved with older adult ministry, this text cuts a little close to home... I've spent a lot of time with Widows, and believe me, there is a huge tendency to forget about them, or not to see them.

Quick story... Back in Austin I had a friend named Ethel who lived in a nursing home for many years. She had been widowed twice, and suffered from Parkinson's disease. Although she

needed a lot of care, Ethel was one of those people who didn't want to be a bother. She didn't complain, in fact she was always upbeat and finding the best in every bad situation.

Many of you may know, Nursing Homes are required by law to offer fresh water to the residents every so often. Frequently when I visit, care workers are pushing carts of ice water up and down the halls and entering rooms, offering water and always chatting about the weather or what's going on. These little "water" visits are usually short, but generally upbeat and cheerful.

One day I was visiting Ethel and a care worker stopped by to give her some water. The care worker was gruff and filled the water without so much as a "hello" or "how are you." I commented to Ethel that the care worker didn't even look at her. Ethel said, "sometimes we don't exist." I'll never forget that... She was always wise and gracious and kind, would never complain, and it hurt me to think that sometimes she felt like she was invisible...

I wonder if the Widow in the Temple felt that way. Maybe a little under the radar screen... I imagine all of us, at some time in our lives have felt a little like that...

Another story... When I was the executive director at the Shepherd's Center in Cannon Falls, we were a small non-profit organization. Our motto was seniors serving seniors, serving the community... We were an ecumenical senior volunteer program.

As the director it was my job to make sure all donations were receipted for tax purposes. In other words, I knew how much people were donating. Every fall we had a big fund raiser, and donations would come in the mail. And every year I was so deeply moved by the generosity... And the thing that moved me the deepest, was the donations made by people who could least afford it.

I knew many people very well, I heard the stories, I knew the financial constraints of living on social security... I knew people were making decisions between medications and groceries. And still, some of these people were our biggest financial contributors.

One day, we received a big contribution from someone I knew was living on the edge. She was a regular and so I had an opportunity to chat with her in private. I mentioned we appreciated her donation but I wondered if it might be too much, if she should use the money for something else. She looked at me with a big smile on her face and said it was the biggest joy in her life to give it. And so, I honored it, I let it go...

I'm always reminded that our money follows our hearts. The widow in our gospel lesson gave everything she had. She gave from her heart and didn't expect anything in return... Kind of like my friend at the Shepherd's Center...

These experiences taught me never to be judgmental about how much people give. Because it can be very surprising!

In our gospel reading, a widow gives all she has, out of love she wants to participate, she wants to belong. And she doesn't ask that anyone notice her...

Now, contrast that with "...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..." Apparently, the scribes are good at hanging out with the influential people... the movers and shakers...

One of the critiques of that religion, that Jesus seems to be suggesting is that while they'll take the money of the most vulnerable, they also ignore them. In other words, take from the poor and hang out with the rich.

My last story... Kris and I went to Europe about ten years ago, Europe's medieval cathedrals are just amazingly beautiful and awe inspiring. When we were in Paris, we visited Notre Dame.

I sat down in the last row and just looked up at the incredible sanctuary. It's immense, you can't do it justice by describing it. I sat there and appreciated all the work that went into the building. It's just simply amazing...

Then I started to remember reformation history. The financing of big medieval cathedrals was always a process of collecting money in any way possible. Priests were expected to preach about giving. They were to pay close attention to the wealthy benefactors.

And of course, with a lot of pressure to raise money, a very effective way to do that was through the sale of indulgences. In other words, the selling of forgiveness. Of course, this is one of the central practices of the church that Luther railed against. We are justified by grace through faith, forgiveness is free, it cannot be purchased.

I sat in the back row of the church, and started reflecting on the amount of money it must have taken to build such a building, I thought about the pressure to come up with all that money, and the sale of all those indulgences, I started to see the building as an immense monument to oppression.

Sure, it was built to the glory of God, but it was also built on the on the backs of many good people, selling them worthless certificates of forgiveness. Condemning them to hell, unless they came up with money... When I started to think about all these things, I got tears in my eyes.

Religion can be so life giving, and it can also be so life draining...

The first commandment is all about idolatry. I'm the Lord your God, you shall have no other God's before me. Religion and money... Religion and money... Never a good mix... And in today's world of big Television churches, I wonder if this might apply to big productions and big ratings... You can judge that for yourself...

The good news today is that Jesus sees the widow—She matters! He knows her sacrifice. He knows that she has given everything she has. When we might feel as if no one sees us, no one cares about us, Jesus does...

And soon enough in our story, as Passion week unfolds, Jesus himself will go to the cross and give his all.

He shed his blood for all of us. For the poor widow who gave her all, and even for the scribes who like to walk around and show off their robes. In this Kingdom of God, the first shall be last, and the last shall be first— there will be no distinction, all will belong—because in God’s kingdom, everyone matters...

Amen...