

The Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Proper 27
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St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
November 7, 2021
1 Kings 17:8-16
Psalm 146
Hebrews 9:24-28
Mark 12:38-44

Scribes and Widows

Our gospel today takes place in the middle of Holy Week, the week between Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his execution. Jesus and his ever-growing entourage have completed the journey to Jerusalem. They and many thousands of others have come to the holy city to observe Passover.

In Mark's gospel, chapter 11, and the portion of chapter 12 before where we pick up today, tell us that Jesus and his core group of twelve male disciples are staying in Bethany at the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. Throughout the week, they walk the mile and a half into the city of Jerusalem every day, visit the temple, and go back to Bethany to spend the night.

On one of the days of this week, Jesus clears the temple of money changers and sacrificial-animal-price inflaters.

On another day, he goes to the temple and just looks around. On one day, he has a series of encounters with chief priests, elders of the people, scribes, Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees—basically, the majority of the recognizable religious parties and factions within the Judaism of his day.

Today we are with Jesus in the courts of temple on another of the days in the week leading up to his death. He is observing and teaching.

He and his disciples and many interested listeners are somewhere in the forty acres of the temple complex. Many people are coming and going because it's the week of Passover.

Today he is observing the behavior of many scribes and one widow.

The scribes are religious lawyers; they are in the minority of those who are literate, who can read and write Hebrew. They hand copy not only the Hebrew scriptures but also write up documents needed by others to transact business. Jesus is

observing and commenting on their affection for fancy clothes, special treatment, and drawing attention to themselves as important.

And he is observing the behavior of one particular widow who puts two copper coins worth a penny into the temple treasury.

The behaviors of the scribes and the behavior of the widow are related.

Not all scribes think alike and act alike, of course. In fact, earlier in this same twelfth chapter of Mark, Jesus has an encounter in the temple, probably on this same day, with one scribe. And this man is a scribe who understands, as Jesus does, that love of God and love of neighbor are more important than burnt offerings and animal sacrifices. Jesus tells him that he is not far from the kingdom of God.

Clearly, then, not all scribes are self-important and corrupt, for we have this example of a scribe whose interpretation of scripture and tradition is in alignment with that of Jesus.

Not all scribes are corrupt, but some scribes are. For some of them, in Jesus' words, "devour widows' houses."

What does that mean and how could they do that? By not handling widows' estates and resources honestly. By siphoning off as their compensation for legal work assets that legitimately belong to widows, misappropriating money that can perhaps pay for fancy clothes.

Just after his instruction to beware of scribes in general, Jesus observes this widow who puts two copper coins into the temple treasury. We don't know how he knows this, but Jesus says she has "put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

This text has been mishandled and misinterpreted for a very long time. All kinds of things have been read into it and imposed upon it.

The widow's gift has been used as an example of sacrificial giving. Often it has been used to manipulate people into giving, especially people of very little means. Her life-threatening donation has been held up as exemplary for centuries.

Yet, Jesus does not in fact praise her action. He does not instruct his disciples to follow her example. This is not a parable or an exhortation. Nor is it a commendation. It is an observation: she put in all she had, all she had to live on.

Just as not all scribes were alike in the first century, not all widows were alike either.

Some widows were wealthy and owned substantial amounts of property. Other widows were peasants, like many other people in Palestine in the first century. But, just because a woman was a widow doesn't mean that she was destitute.

Some widows were quite poor, such as the unnamed widow of Zarephath in our reading today from 1 Kings. She has a son to feed and hardly any food. There is a famine in the land.

Elijah asks her to provide food for him first *and* promises that if she does, she will have enough to get by on until the famine is over. She, too, is an example of a widow who gives all she has.

Elijah asks the widow of Zarephath to give all she has left.

Nobody asks the widow in the story from Mark to give all that she has.

Hardly any commentators on this story have pointed out that Jesus isn't holding the widow up as an example to be emulated. He is observing, quite simply, that she put in all she had. Compared to those who gave and had plenty left over, her gift was larger. He is dealing in smaller and larger not better and worse.

The reality is that if these two coins are all this widow has left, if they are all she has to live on, then the story illustrates to what degree the temple system in Jerusalem was not functioning as it should have.

Repeatedly, Hebrew scripture says that the wider community should provide for all widows, orphans, and strangers in the land who are in need.

The widow of Zarephath does provide for Elijah. *And* Elijah provides for her and her son in return through a miracle of multiplication.

Widows and orphans, if they are poor, are supposed to be provided *for*, not asked to give what they do not have.

In the case of the widow Jesus is observing in our gospel today, we don't know anything about her previous situation. She *might* have been exploited.

Quite likely, in the context of this story, someone has “devoured her house.” Someone has eaten up her assets. Someone has helped themselves to her estate. She is now destitute.

She should not be putting money into the temple treasury. She should be receiving alms *from* the temple treasury.

The fact that she is giving rather than receiving indexes the extent to which the system is out of kilter.

Jesus' next teaching in Mark, which is our gospel for next week, further underscores that the temple system was not functioning properly. Next week we will consider some of our own systems that might need an overhaul.

But today, what do this destitute widow and the implied corrupt scribe who has devoured her house have to say to us?

We are entering a new era as we emerge, we pray, into a post-pandemic world. What do you, what do I want to do differently post-COVID-19?

And, perhaps equally importantly, what do we want to *keep* doing that we began or returned to doing during COVID-19? Both in our individual lives and our families, what should we continue?

Speaking personally, I know that my health improved during lockdown. I spent less time in traffic. I squandered less of my energy driving to attend in-person meetings. I exercised more. I ate better. I spent more time with my loved ones. I spent more time outdoors in nature. In many ways, I felt more connected to God, myself, and others than pre-pandemic.

In the midst of those improved conditions and practices, I did very important discernment. I remembered that joy should be part of the equation of work and vocation. And remembering joy is a big reason we wound up joining you at St Paul's and moving to Key West.

I need to be aware of my internal “scribe,” the one inside of me who knows how to justify all kinds of things, including overwork, inattention to health, avoidance of healthy conflict, misappropriation of time, and on and on. I must beware not to “devour my own house.”

And I need to be aware of that internal “widow” who will try to give things she doesn’t have to give or can’t really afford to give and still sustain her own life.

Do you also have an internal “scribe” and an internal “widow”? How are you getting along with them these days?

We have community discernment as well as individual discernment to do. That is, what you and I do as individuals is not where discernment ends. But it is where discernment starts.

I commend for your consideration these discernment questions from Enneagram teacher Suzanne Stabile:

What is mine to do?

What is mine to say?

What is mine to care about?

God give us wisdom and courage to answer these questions honestly and live accordingly.