



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### **Pentecost 25 – Proper 27 Year B**

#### **Giving**

**[RCL]: Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17; Psalm 127; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44**

She was a woman. She was poor. These are two facts anyone could tell that day in the Court of the Women in the Temple in Jerusalem.

She was also a widow who was down to her last two coins. These are facts that Jesus also knew about her.

She was a woman of great faith. She became a living sermon. She remains an icon of faith as she put her whole trust in God, not holding anything back.

This unnamed woman is known now by her marital status and her coins rather than her name, for the story is “The Widow’s Mite” and she is “The Widow.” Yet we should be careful to note that it is the story of the widow’s mites as the woman had two small coins. Each of her coins were worth one four-hundredth of a shekel or what we might think of as an eighth of a penny each. Too small to bear a legible imprint, they were the grubbiest of coins in the empire of Rome.

Mark sets the scene for us sparingly. Jesus has been teaching in the temple courts. Now, on his way out, he pauses over and against the treasury to watch as offerings are made. Each person would walk up to one of the thirteen trumpet-shaped receptacles, which were lined along the wall of the Court of the Women. As they tossed in their offering, the person was expected to say aloud the amount and purpose of the gift in order to be heard by the priest overseeing the collections.

It would have been an impressive sight to see people in fine clothes tossing in large sums, calling out to all how much they gave. And in such a group, who would notice the widow tossing the two smallest coins in the realm into the offering? Yet, in a move that is so like him, Jesus notices and calls attention to this act of faith.

Jesus calls his disciples together and says, “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.”

Jesus knows that these are not any two coins, but the woman's last two coins. The text says, "All she had to live on," but the Greek is starker still. What is really said is that she put in her bios. It's the word from which we get "biology," the study of life. For Jesus tells us that the widow put her "life" into the temple treasury that day.

This is not a sermon about tithing, for the woman did not give ten percent of her income. These were her last two coins to rub together, and rather than keep one back, she tossed both into the temple treasury's coffers. The widow gave 100 percent of her money. The widow is down to two practically worthless little coins, and she trusts it all to God. If this were a gamble, then the widow would be laying all her money on God. But this is not a gamble, for the widow does not bet her money; she trusts her life to God.

It would be nice if Mark filled in more details for us. Was Jesus' arm around the woman as he said, "This poor widow has put in more ..." or was the woman blending back into the crowd, never to be seen again? Or perhaps Jesus asked his own keeper of the purse, Judas Iscariot, to give something to this woman so that she would not go hungry that evening. Or better still, did the widow come to be a Christ follower? Did she join with the other women who journeyed with Jesus from Galilee to the cross and beyond?

The Gospel never answers these questions. The nameless widow who gave two small coins fades into the background. We may want to know her name in order to name churches, schools, and hospitals in her honor. We may want to give her a place of honor in Jesus' stories alongside disciples whose names we know, though their trust in God wasn't always so exemplary.

But perhaps namelessness is appropriate for this living parable. And maybe it is best, too, that we don't find out how her story ends. The nameless woman whose ultimate fate we never know is perhaps an even better icon of trust, for her story was a precarious one. She went to the temple that day not knowing if she would ever have two little coins to call her own again. It could have been her path to a life of begging or even a station on the road to starvation.

But in facing an uncertain future, the widow reached out to God. She trusted that if she gave everything she had to God, even the little she gave would be honored. And whether she was repaid handsomely by Jesus himself, or God cared for her in some other way, we, too, have to trust. We trust that the widow's story turned out all right. We trust that whether she lived or died, she was God's.

And by her example, Jesus shows that what we withhold may matter more than what we offer. The widow was a woman of great faith, who held nothing back. She knew what Jesus' disciples were just learning: we are to give, knowing that everything we have is God's already. We can't give God anything. But we can offer our very selves to the Kingdom of God, holding nothing back.

She was a woman. She was poor. She was a widow down to her last two coins. She was a child of God who placed her whole life back in her loving creator's hands.

*This sermon, written by the Rev. Canon Frank Logue, originally ran November 12, 2006.*