

Mark shows Jesus as something of a “people watcher.” He has spent time watching and listening to people, discreetly enough for them to forget he is there. He observes how people relate one to another, and gains insight into their behavior and motives. In the previous verses, the religious leaders engage Jesus in arguments about paying taxes, marriage laws, and which commandments are the most important. The debate is not engaged from a genuine heart to deepen their faith, but more as a way of discrediting catching Jesus in a theological trap. He answers each question without getting caught in the trap. The religious leaders are truly amazed at him. Jesus condemns the way they use their positions of influence to their advantage, like getting the best seats in the house in the synagogue and the seats of honor at banquets. He is saying that their hearts contain the wrong motives; they are out to make themselves look good.

As a devout Jew himself, Jesus would have attended the Temple and witnessed how people conducted themselves in places of worship as well. Jesus and his disciples were in the temple area near the treasury. From their vantage point, they could see what people were putting into the offering plates. Some would have made it discreetly - others ensuring that their contribution was noticed. Those who placed large sums in the treasury do not impress Jesus at all. Then along comes a poor widow, who catches the attention of Jesus and puts in two small coins – Jesus says, all she had to live on.

When I read this passage, I sometimes wonder about the widow's state of mind. What was she thinking as she put in every penny she owned? Why would she want to support the temple system - one that oppressed widows like her? Go back a couple of verses in Mark 12 and you'll find Jesus warning his listeners about the temple scribes. They *"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. They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers"* (vs 38-40). In the very next passage, we find the widow giving all she has to an institution whose leaders *"devour widows' houses"*! What kind of fool is this woman that she would have anything to do with a religious institution that will take the last of her money - and her house to boot?

There is a parallel story that we also read this morning from I Kings. If anyone had a good excuse not to give, it was the widow of Zarephath. God tells Elijah that a time of drought & famine is at hand, a consequence of the nation's self-centered behavior under King Ahab. People were literally starving to death during that time. And the King had decreed that all prophets of the Lord be found and put to death. Elijah is said to go to an area far away removed from the capital of Samaria called Wadi Cherith. In this desolate place, God provides for Elijah by sending ravens to bring food – unlikely agents of God's provision. Elijah survives, until the brook ran dry. At that point, God sends Elijah to the village of Zarephath and tells him that a widow there will feed him. When Elijah shows up and requests a drink, she is gathering sticks to warm a last supper for herself and her son. The woman wants to be hospitable, but when he asks for bread to go with the water, it's too much. She tells him that she's gathering wood to bake the handful of meal and bit of oil that's left for herself and her son, and that they will eat this meal and await death.

The widow faced a really hard decision: to withhold hospitality or become a traitor to the King, and perhaps starve herself. She fears to help him, because there simply is not enough. Elijah

understands her fear and promises that if she feeds him, God will provide. "*Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake ... For thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth.*" She went and did as Elijah said, And God does provide.

When we look at the historical context of widows in the ancient world, we begin to understand that the woman at the temple and the widow from Zarephath were not a *poor* widows; they were poor because they were widows. There was no such thing as a rich widow in that culture. In the ancient world widowhood was a frightening prospect, as reflected in the frequent refrain in Israel's laws calling for special care for the widow, the orphan, the poor and the stranger in the land. Women were totally dependent on their male relatives for their livelihood. Widows were forced to live off of the good graces of other male relatives and anyone in the community who might provide a meal here, a little money there. The little meal and oil were all the widow of Zarephath had, and the two little coins in the woman's hand at the Temple were probably all she had. The sad truth is, with or without the coins, she was still a dependent person. The little they had wasn't going to change their lives. They were dependent on God and neighbor for everything.

The family in Zarephath could have eaten their bread and starved to death a few days later. The widow at the temple might have hung on to her thin copper coins that day. But, sooner or later, they would be spent and she would be broke. If they relied upon themselves, both widows knew they would surely die. They also knew that their only chance was to rely on God's grace. They were totally dependent on God, and so they gave.

Now, I need to be careful before I step over a line. If this text is used to encourage sacrificial religious giving from the poor, that is spiritual abuse. We need to look at the deeper message the scripture from I Kings and Jesus are trying to convey.

Sometimes in life we face those decisions that are not clear-cut. They are in the gray areas of life. What kind of decisions do we face in everyday life? Sometimes the right thing to do is to take a stand on the wrong side of the law, because sometimes human law takes a back seat to God's law. Jesus says to his disciples: "*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.*" The Greek word behind "all she had to live on" is ambiguous. It can mean "her whole living," as in the story of the widow of Zarephath who fed Elijah, the man of God, from the little she and her son had left to live on. The same word—"bios," from which we get "biology"—can also mean "life": this widow, at the mercy of unjust scribes in the temple, is nevertheless offering to God, through the temple, "her whole life." The widow is like Jesus who similarly chooses to give "his whole life" in the face of unjust structures that destroy it.

One of the points both scriptures are trying to address, I believe, is cultivating a radical dependence upon God. And when we live from this stance it also cultivates a ***Genuine Heart, a Grateful Spirit, and a Generous Attitude.***

One question for reflection is what constitutes a tipping point between self-protection and generosity? And I am not talking only about being financially generous. The ultimate meaning of generosity is the sharing of the goodness of the life God has given us. Generosity springs from gratitude, from our willingness to be thankful for all that has been given. It is not the amount which one gives that matters but the *spirit* in which the gift is given

Capacity of the human heart: ability to grow tender, open, and generous & its capacity to grow callous, unfeeling, and self-serving. Selfless and self-sacrificial acts of this nature just do not fit into the natural scheme of this world; none of Darwin's evolutionary laws can account for such a show of altruism.

Luther when he stands before the Emperor's right-hand man and says: "*Here I stand, I can do no other (than to affirm my writings and confess my faith), so help me God!*"

People go through three conversions in the Christian faith: their head, their heart and their pocketbook—Martin Luther

Two nuns were taking a drive out in the country when, all of a sudden, the car just died. The driver looked on the dash board and realized that they had run out of gas. Fortunately, there was a farm just up the road. So the nuns walked over to the farm house and explained their problem. The farmer was very gracious, and said he would siphon some gas out of his car for them. The only problem, he said, was that he didn't have a gas can. They looked around the barn and the only thing they could find to pour the gas into was an old, metal bedpan. It will work, said the farmer, and there's a gas station just a couple of miles up the road, so the bedpan should hold enough to get you there.

So, the nuns fill up the bedpan and carefully walk back to their car. As they get to their car, they see another car parked behind, with a gentleman sitting behind the wheel who is obviously an orthodox Jew – complete with yarmulke, beard, the whole bit – getting ready to come and help. The nuns wave at him, tell him they're fine, and one starts pouring from the bedpan into their gas tank, while the other says a brief prayer of thanks for the kindness of the farmer. The man in the car is a bit flabbergasted – all he sees is one nun praying and the other pouring from a bedpan into the gas tank. But the nuns assure him everything's fine. So, the man starts to drive away, then stops and says: "Ladies, you know that we don't share the same religious beliefs, but, boy, do I admire your faith!"