

# The Widow's Mite (Mark 12:38-44)

Posted on [November 7, 2015](#)



*Risking all  
she frees herself  
of her last small treasure.  
As the coins clatter away  
her heart beats with fear and joy.  
The widow flings her poverty in the face of power.*

As some of you know, last month Rob and I were on a cruise in the Mediterranean. If you ask Rob what was the best thing about the cruise, he'll say, "The food!" And it's true – we both have wonderful memories of the food – Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese – and of course all the meals on board the ship.

***Poverty in the face of power:*** As I hear this gospel story (and this poem) this morning, I'm remembering one particular dinner on the ship – when a political topic came up, the upcoming presidential election. It was hard for me to hear the whole conversation over the background chatter, but then all of a sudden, I heard a man across the table speak very clearly and firmly: "I don't agree with 'one man, one vote!' Why should someone who contributes nothing to the economy – someone who doesn't have a job, or someone whose job doesn't do much to grow the economy – why should they get the same vote as people who run large businesses, and create many other jobs?"

I continued to eat my sumptuous meal in silence, not willing to argue about politics, or values, over the din. But I thought of all the mothers, who don't get paid but raise our children to be adults who contribute to society. And I thought of all the people, men and women, who get paid minimum salaries to do the jobs without which our homes, businesses, and organizations could not function. Should only those people who contribute substantially to the economy get a voice and a vote?

Make no mistake, this man is not the only member of our society who thinks this way. He just said what he thinks out loud, rather belligerently, after too much wine.

But Jesus thinks differently.

The widow Jesus notices in today's gospel has received a lot of attention over the centuries. She is always remembered and honored for her radical generosity. And indeed she should be – and not just this unnamed widow, but all the unnamed “little” people, the poor and powerless, not only in the church, but in society.

Study after study shows that the poor (those most stressed by the hard facts of their daily lives) give more of their meager income to the church – and to charity – than the rich. That is, when you look at the percentage rather than the total, the poor are always far, far more generous than the rich.

So who are we, in light of Jesus' ancient words – and in light of modern surveys – to say some classes of people should have no vote or voice because they contribute so little to the total amount in the money box?

The widow Jesus points to was a very real person, I'm sure, but she is also a symbol. She is a symbol of all the widows, all the children, all the poor, all the minority groups who have no voice, who are considered worthless by the powerful, yet give more of their substance to the body politic (and to the body religious) than the rich.

I remember the night I learned this lesson in a way that permanently changed my thinking about the power of money. I was a newly ordained priest. The rector, my new boss, had asked me to be the clergy representative on a new stewardship committee. (I was too green to realize that he put me on this committee because he himself was afraid to talk to the congregation about money.) I did already know, however, that he was intimidated by certain people in the congregation – who in his mind had great power because they had so much money.

So that fall I dutifully joined the stewardship committee, and the whole committee attended the November vestry meeting. During that meeting we sat in concentric circles, and the stewardship chairman, who was tabulating the pledges, was sitting right in front of me in the inner circle. Unfortunately or fortunately, I could plainly see the list he was holding in his lap.

It was a list of the pledges that had already come in, and he was telling the vestry, in a very general and anonymous way, how the campaign was going.

But there in his lap was the list – penciled names and amounts, running in a long line down the page. And before I could look away, I saw the paltry amounts pledged by the people who most intimidated the rector – and the much larger amounts pledged by people who were obviously struggling financially.

Since that night I have rarely been afraid of the opinions of powerful people. I try, instead, to listen to their opinions – as fully and deeply, and with as much compassion – as I listen to those whose lives and struggles pull at my heart strings.

And that brings me back to the widow and her mite.

It seems to me that listening to a gospel story is a lot like listening to a poem. We hear a poem, we even think we understand it, but we usually know we're missing some (or even all) of the meaning.

And so the church through the centuries has heard the story of the widow's mite – time and time again. And time and time again, the church has thought it understands Jesus' meaning. And yet, and yet – time and time again, by our deepest thoughts and our outer actions, in our churches and in our societies – we demonstrate that we don't get Jesus' meaning.

How can we change this? Today, I invite you into an action.

It's a very small action, I admit, but every profound change begins with a small change in our behavior, even a symbolic action. And here's the action I'm asking for this morning –**pick up your pencils.**

Yes, pick up your pencils, and write down this little poem about the widow's mite. (I don't know who wrote this poem, but I do know it's powerful. If anyone can find the source, please let me know.)

By writing down these words, by rehearsing these words, we'll have to listen to this widow – and to Jesus – again and again. Perhaps as we listen we'll also begin to change our attitudes about giving, about the poor, about those who don't seem to matter much in our society.

**We may even learn how to fling our own poverty into the face of power.**

*Risking all she frees herself of her last small treasure.*

*As the coins clatter away her heart beats with fear and joy.*

*The widow flings her poverty in the face of power.*