

“Lessons from the Widows”

Introduction: Widows, we see throughout the Bible, along with orphans and foreigners, have a special place in the heart of God. This morning we’ll meet a widow who seems to have a special place for God in her heart. Jesus meets her at the Temple in Jerusalem where he and his followers have finally arrived. On his way, over the course of the last few weeks, we considered the encounters he had in Jericho with a blind beggar named Bartimaeus and a tax collector named Zacchaeus. Jesus transformed the lives of both of those men, and then, before leaving the city and heading up to Jerusalem, he left them with a parable which taught them that the Kingdom of God was not going to arrive at once upon his arrival in the holy city. It would be consummated at a later date, and in the interim, they should be good stewards of what God had entrusted into their care.

These days in Jerusalem, as the celebration of Passover was approaching, were full, full of arriving pilgrims and joyful activity. Jesus rode into town on a donkey, to the cheers of the crowd. He entered the Temple and drove out those who were doing business there and preventing prayer from taking place. And then he seems to have spent a day or two fencing with the religious leaders, about various issues of theology and practice.

Not all of these leaders opposed Jesus. Some even affirmed him and were curious about learning more. But there did emerge a group, identified by Jesus as the teachers of the law, also called scribes, who Jesus tagged with the word, “Beware!” As he warned his listeners, he had a couple of lessons for them to learn from the false piety of the religious leaders, and the genuine piety of a widow.

In our OT reading we hear Moses describe what life for the people of God was to look like when they entered and got settled in the Promised Land. Our NT reading reveals that many of the leaders were missing the mark. [READ]

I. Warning against False Piety

A. Our word from Jesus this morning begins with the word “Beware!” What’s behind this? Well, the trouble with these teachers is that they were supposed to be guiding God’s people in living God’s ways, but the ways in which they were living were far from God! In general, the problem was two-fold.

1. One, they were filled with pride. This could be seen in their love to go grocery shopping while wearing their long, flowing robes, so that others would recognize them and affirm their superior rank in society with all sorts of honorable greetings. They also insisted on sitting in the front row at church, and having box seats at concerts and sporting events so the cameras could find them.
2. Two, they were filled with hypocrisy. Their praying wasn’t sincere. It was not meant to be heard by God but to be seen by others. And instead of taking care of the widows, they took advantage of them, “devouring their houses” as Jesus describes it, using their position of trust to either prey on the hospitality of these women in support of their ministry, or getting them to sign over their property to the temple. Either way the widows were left penniless.

B. It is, of course, a human need to be recognized and affirmed by others.

I was with a group of pastors last week. The topic was “late life calling,” or, to put it another way, “aging faithfully.” Essentially it was a day spent discussing the joys and challenges of retirement. I found it interesting to consider that retirement wasn’t really a thing until the late 1930’s when social security began and the late 50’s when improvements in health care enabled life to be extended by a couple of decades. In response, the “industry” of retirement began with the constriction of golf courses and cruise ships. Such might be fun for a while, but it was soon discovered that not much in the way of meaning and purpose could be found in either!

How is one’s identity now to be found? Well, how it is not to be found is by forcing people to honor you or affirm you, as these scribes were about. Such a need becomes open to temptation for anyone in a leadership position. Jesus was not only holding the scribes accountable; he seemed to be warning his disciples that such pride and hypocrisy could surface in their lives if they were not careful, character traits that have no place in the economy and kingdom of God.

II. Celebrating Genuine Piety

A. In contrast to the pride and hypocrisy of the teachers of the law comes the remarkable actions of a poor widow, likely one of the widows whose house had been “devoured.” She came into view as Jesus looked up and noticed all the rich tossing their offering into what Luke calls the temple treasury. This was an area which contained 13 trumpet-shaped receptacles into which worshippers put their offerings. Each trumpet collected funds for a different need. But no matter which trumpet you chose, if you put in a large amount, your many coins would make a large clanging sound, announcing the greatness of your gift. Not unlike, perhaps, the sound of the slot machines in Las Vegas (I’m told!) which are designed to be loud to announce your success. Such a loud sound might be what Jesus was referring to when he cautioned, in his Sermon on the Mount:

So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. [Ma. 6:2]

B. By contrast, as Jesus was watching and listening, came the tiny clink, clink, as a poor widow threw in her last two coins, coins that were of the smallest value possible. But she had put in, Jesus observed, more than all the others. God’s way of measuring reality, it seems, is often the opposite of what we’d expect. And, instead of pride and hypocrisy, what came out of this widow’s heart was humility and a concern for others.

III. Responding to the Generosity of Jesus

A. I think, then, that there are two conclusions we can draw here as we consider the pride of the scribes and the generosity of the widow and, ultimately, Jesus.

1. As we think about giving, in this season of giving, and particularly as our pledge cards will appear in your email box in just a week or so, Jesus is pointing us to our hearts. He is asking us to consider the motivation for our giving. As Paul encourages:

Each one should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7).

There was nothing cheerful about the giving by the rich, just prideful, just a desire to be noticed and praised. There was, however, much that was cheerful about the giving by the poor widow. She had a desire to be used by God to help others, no matter how little she was able to give in comparison to others, and a willingness to trust God to meet her needs. So, may her generous heart and sacrificial spirit be an example to us.

2. Jesus is not just praising the widow for such a great sacrifice. He is actually continuing to condemn the teachers of the law by highlighting this widow and her minimal resources as one who has been left little – devoured – by a temple system, and by those in authority, that had become self-serving and corrupt. God’s way for his community, as we heard Moses describe it in our reading from Deuteronomy, was designed to keep women like this widow from becoming so destitute. So, may we allow her plight to remind and motivate us to seek the reform of systems that ignore those in need – the widow, orphan, and foreigner – that when they trust God to meet their needs, we are the ones who God uses to make that happen.

B. Behind all of this is the generosity of Jesus, who gave his life that we might reclaim our own. As the Apostle Paul explains:

Though he was rich, yet for your sake [Jesus] became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9).

Or as Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*:

You are familiar with the generosity of our Master, Jesus Christ. Rich as he was, he gave it all away for us . . .

How can we cultivate this generosity, this goodness to us, that it might bear fruit in our lives?

1. One way would be to think back on that widow, sit with Jesus in the temple treasury, and talk with him about what she did and what he was about to do...how her giving all that she had foreshadows his giving to us. How do we feel about that?

2. You might also spend some time sitting with our psalm for today – 145. There, the psalmist helps us to prayerfully meditate, in four sections, on God’s greatness (vv. 1-6), goodness (vv. 7-9), glory (vv. 10-13), and generosity (vv. 14-21).

As we do so, may the generosity of Jesus work its way deep into our hearts, that we might give in the year ahead not only thoughtfully and intentionally, but, because we’ve experienced his love, gratefully and cheerfully.