

One of Life's Minor Characters
Mark 12:38-44
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
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Dr. Brent Beasley

So you've had your TV's back for the last few days. No more political ads.

It was an interesting election season to be sure, especially since our Tennessee Senate race became of such national interest. The campaigns of Bob Corker and Harold Ford, Jr. were in the national spotlight. Their eyes of the nation have been on Bob Corker and Harold Ford, Jr.

They each tried their hardest to portray the other as leading a life that is out of touch with regular people. But of course the truth is that both of these men are people of power and privilege.

Bob Corker is a multi-millionaire who was mayor of a city; Harold Ford comes from a powerful political family and went to high school at an elite prep school in the Washington, D.C. area with other children of U.S. congressmen.

They certainly faced the heat of the spotlight during this campaign, but they are used to it. Harold Ford and Bob Corker are used to being major players in life. They are used to having their every move watched and scrutinized. They are used to staging photo ops where the public can get a look at them

portraying whatever image their handlers have told them they need to portray.

Today in the 12th chapter of Mark, we encounter one of life's minor characters, one of the little people, one of the invisible people who come and go without anyone noticing what they do, or what they are wearing, or when they leave the room.

This widow was a bit player, one of the extras who ring the stage while the major characters stride around in the middle, dazzling everyone with their costumes and high drama.

In the Temple scene Mark describes for us, those characters include rich people and scribes—among many, many others, but those are the ones who stand out—people who know that other people are watching them and who seem used to it, even pleased, when heads turn and talk stops for a moment as they make their entrances.

The scribes of Jesus' day were the elite, lawyers of the religious law who were the official interpreters of God's word. They were the religious professionals, the ones to whom people turned for guidance and counsel.

But they weren't paid like our ministers are. In fact, they were forbidden to receive any salary for doing their jobs, so they lived on subsidies instead—a little from their students, a little from the food pantry funds, a little from the temple treasury.

Some scribes weren't content with a little, however, and they found ways to make a lot more. They would use their

influence to wrangle invitations to people's homes, for example, and they would accept the best seats, the best cuts of meat, the best cups of wine. When they wore out their welcome, no one dared to tell them, least of all their poorer parishioners, who were honored to spend their savings on such esteemed guests.

The scribes would plant themselves in the temple for photo ops in their long, impressive robes in order to be seen by those who came to make their offerings to God. Clearly, the scribes were the ones in the spotlight, with power and privilege, they were the ones to watch.

They were the ones to watch, but Jesus wasn't watching them in the temple that day. He wasn't paying attention to what was happening on center stage at all because a lot more interested in what was going on over in the wings, and in woman in particular.

I don't know how she caught Jesus' attention. She didn't catch anyone else's attention, that's for sure. She was all washed up, all used up. Even a scribe could see he didn't want to invite himself over to her house for lunch. There was no food in her pantry.

When she lost her husband, she lost her name and her place. You might even say she lost her face. She became invisible. She was a long way from the spotlight. No one saw her anymore. No one, that is, except Jesus.

[Barbara Brown Taylor, The Preaching Life]

It seems recently a pastor in a Toronto church had the tough duty of doing two funeral services in one day. The church's custom was to print funeral bulletins as orders of service. The computer savvy pastor figured he could save some time by writing and saving one service in its entirety on the computer and then merely editing that service to fit the second.

He used the find and replace function to make the computer change every time the name appeared in the bulletin of the first woman, Mary, who had died to the name, Edna, of the second woman.

All went well in Edna's service until the Apostle's Creed, which the congregation now read that Jesus was "conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Edna."

Baptists are not a credal people for a lot of reasons. One more reason is that Marys and Ednas are never interchangeable or replaceable to God. Each person is noticed by God. Even when you're out of the spotlight. God knows your name just as sure and clear as God knows Bob Corker's or Harold Ford's or Billy Graham's name.

You are noticed. You are significant.

Jesus saw that old, anonymous widow that nobody else knew or saw—he saw her walk up to the temple treasury to give up her two coins. And something about the way she did it let him know that it was the end for her, that it was everything she had, that when she let go of those two coins and turned to walk away, Jesus knew she had nothing left that was not God's.

Her sacrifice was complete, so complete that he called his disciples over to see it. *Truly I tell you*, he said to them, *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.*

That is why we know about her and tell her story today—this nameless woman playing one of life’s minor characters—because she gave everything she had. She held nothing back, which made her last penny a fortune in God’s eyes.

We’d like to give sacrificially like that, but, you know, the credit card minimum payment is due.

115 million Americans carry credit card debt from month to month. That number has doubled over the past decade. Today, the average family owes roughly \$8,000 on their credit cards. This debt has helped generate record profits for the credit card industry— last year, more than \$30 billion before taxes.

I’m sure you know that credit card companies send free cards to kids before they ever graduate from college or realize what a mess they’ll get themselves in by using them. They just send these credit cards out to college kids. That’s like handing out free crack at the junior high school.

We’d like to give sacrificially, but we have financial obligations to meet.

We’d like to give sacrificially like that woman, but, you know, necessities are necessities.

Like shampoo. I’m pretty sure there are two active cleansing ingredients in any shampoo, regardless of price. But we pay an extra \$8 per bottle for three things—to pay the cost of commercials; to convince ourselves of the lie that we can bring life to dead hair; and to leave the shower with hair the scent of witch hazel honeysuckle, which then combines with the juniper scented body wash, and you end up smelling like the produce section at the grocery store.

It’s really impossible, in this day and time, to give sacrificially to the work of God. Or is it?

How are you doing?

Do you own your money or does it own you?

Can you say, like that widow, that you have nothing left that does not belong to God?

Have you ever noticed that the poorest in our country and in our world seem often to be the most devout? That the poorest can often be the most generous?

During the Great Depression, a government agency had the task of traveling through backward mountain areas, in search of poor farmers, to whom they gave some grant money for the purchase of seed, or repairing their homes. One agent came upon an old woman living in a shack. It had no floor. Several windows were broken and covered over with tar paper. The old

woman had but the basic essentials, and was just barely scratching out a living on a miserable plot of land.

The agent said to her, *If the government gave you \$200, what would you do with it?* Her answer was immediate: *I'd give it to the poor.*

I could tell story after story like that.

Why is it that the poorest among us seem to have an easier time letting go of their money than those of us who have quite a bit of money in comparison? I had a flash of insight into that question this week as I studied the story of Jesus and the widow.

I think one reason the widow was able to let go of her money was because she knew those two coins weren't going to change her life. With or without those coins, she was still going to be a dependent person.

The woman at the temple was not a *poor* widow; she was poor because she was a widow. My understanding of sociology and economics in first-century Palestine tells me there was no such thing as a rich widow in that culture. Women were totally dependent on their male relatives for their livelihood.

To be widowed meant not only losing someone you may have loved; it also meant that you were losing the one on whom you were totally dependent. 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 two little coins in the woman's hand were probably all she had. The truth is—and I think the extremely poor know this well—those coins weren't going to change her life. When you've got so little, a penny or two isn't going to move you from welfare to work.

She could be at peace and joyful in her generosity in giving to the temple treasury, because with the coins or without them, she was still a dependent person and she knew it.

Rich people, like most of us, can't say the same. My money gives me independence and freedom from living like a poor widow. I like it that way, and my family likes it that way, so I did not put my entire paycheck in the offering plate today.

But I've also seen poor homeless people who are anxious to find an offering envelope so they can give the only dollar in their pocket toward God's work. I've seen the poorest people in a congregation sacrifice the most in order to give. When you're that low on the economic scale, giving isn't the problem, getting is.

The widow wasn't dependent on her money or her status in life; she had none of these. She was dependent on God and her neighbor for everything. She didn't have a leg to stand on; she didn't have bootstraps to pull up. She was totally dependent. [*“Widow's Walk (Mark 12:38-44)”*, Mary W. Anderson, *The Christian Century*, November 1, 2003, p. 18]

I guess that's why Jesus always made it seem like the poor have an advantage over the rest of us when it comes to being a disciple.

So my flash of insight this week was this: Maybe if I could break free from the illusion that I am independent, that I can take care of myself, that I am solely responsible for my well-being, then I could be free to be generous like that widow. Maybe I could be a much more generous person if I knew that I was completely dependent on God with or without the money I've earned.

If you're like me, you're realizing that you're more like that rich young ruler we looked at a few weeks ago who was not free to follow God because he was bound by other things—I'm realizing that I'm more like that rich young ruler than I am this poor old widow.

I heard about a preacher in, I don't know, was it the 40s when they had Packard's? Well, this guy drove a new one every year, because his brother owned a dealership. He fixed him up, since he knew his preacher brother would never be able to afford one on his own.

Well, one day the preacher was driving around town and he saw a young woman trying to cross the street, carrying a young handicapped boy in her arms. He stopped and asked if he could drive them somewhere. They were going to take the bus, she said, but yes, a ride would be great.

They drove toward the neighborhood and before they reached the house, the little boy, so impressed by the cool car, said, *Mister, could we just drive around a little longer?* They drove all over town.

The boy asked about the car, and the preacher told him about his brother, how he gave him a new car like that every year. The boy sighed wistfully and said, *Man, I wish I could. . . be a brother like that!*

Now did you expect him to say, *I wish I could have a brother like that?* I did.

You don't have to own a car dealership to be a brother like that. You don't have to have a lot of money to be a generous person. In fact it may be easier to be generous if you don't have a lot. As far as I can tell you just need to have something, maybe just two little coins that are worth about a penny.

Look, it would be good for our budget if I could tell you that Jesus told the disciples that they needed to give every cent that they had to the church, so you do, too. But I have to be honest and say that nowhere in this passage does Jesus actually praise the widow for what she is doing.

He simply calls his disciples over to notice her, and to compare what she does with what everyone else is doing. He has them sit down beside him and contemplate the disparity between abundance and poverty, between large sums and two copper coins, between apparent sacrifice and the real thing between apparent generosity and the real thing.

He doesn't put anyone in the wrong. He doesn't dismiss the gifts of the rich. He simply points out that those main characters are the minor givers, while the minor character—this poor widow—turns out to be the most major donor of them all.

[Taylor, The Preaching Life]

Keep your eyes open for the widow. You won't find her on a pedestal. You won't find her in the spotlight. You'll find her over on the edges of your vision, where people are sometimes hard to see.

But if you use your peripheral vision and squint your eyes a little, you just might see her—the main clue to look for is she's usually giving something away: her time, her heart, her living, her life.

She is the one who has nothing left that does not belong to God.

She may not win any elections. You might not even be able to remember her name at first. She appears to be one of life's minor characters. But she is clearly the most significant person in the room—by a landslide.