

Mark 12:38-44

³⁸As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! ⁴⁰They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

⁴¹He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴For 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.”

Several days before today’s Gospel Jesus entered Jerusalem on what we celebrate as Palm Sunday; Mark tells us that the next day, “Jesus drove out those who were selling and buying in the temple, overturning the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.... And when the Chief priests and the scribes heard about it they looked for a way to kill him, for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.”

But the temple guards must have been entranced as well, because they didn’t throw him out when he returned the next day. Jesus is disappointed, I’m sure, because the very people who, in any proper scheme of things, ought to have been the ones to recognise his messiahship are the very one who reject him.

The scribes of Jesus’ day were Jerusalem’s elite, doctors of the law whose long years of study made them the official interpreters of God’s word. They were the religious professionals, the ones to whom people turned for guidance and counsel.

They were the clergy who wore long robes and whose names were listed in the bulletin. But they were not paid as our clergy are. They were, in fact, forbidden to receive pay for doing their jobs, so they lived on subsidies instead — a little from their students, a little from the temple treasury, a little from the poor box.

But some scribes were not content with a little, and found ways to make a lot more — by using their positions to wrangle invitations to people’s homes, for instance, where they accepted the best seats, the best cuts of meat, the best cups of the best wine. And no one would dare tell

them when they had worn out their welcome, especially their poorer parishioners who were glad to spend their savings on such esteemed guests. That seems to be where the idea of devouring widows houses might have come from. A widow had no male to protect her from the machinations of less scrupulous people, so a scribe could invite himself to dinner and hang around long enough to “eat her out of house and home.”

The scribes may have been without money, they were not without honour, honour that some of them turned to their own advantage. They were the major characters in the scene in the temple. They were the guardians of the faith, the religious aristocracy, even if they did sponge off those they were meant to serve.

But Jesus wasn't watching them, he was more interested in what was going on at the edge of the stage. He noticed one woman in particular. It's hard to know how she caught his attention. She did not catch anyone else's. She was all used up. Even a scribe could see there was no meat in her larder; there was none left on her bones. She was out — out of food, out of money, out of what it took for a single woman to scratch her living among people who looked right through her as if she were not there. When she lost her husband, she not only lost her place and her name, she also lost her face. She had become invisible. No one saw her anymore. No one, that is, except Jesus.

He saw her walk 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, so that when she surrendered them, uncurled her fingers from around them and turned to go, he knew that she had nothing left that was not God's.

It is tempting to paint her portrait as possible for us to embody, all the while ignoring her true plight. When we are honest with ourselves, when we tell the truth, few, if any of us are in the same position as the widow, giving the last of her money to an institution that she trusts, to

her God in whom she hopes. Sure, we gladly offer up portions off what we have, after some careful calculations, managing the risks. But there is no way that we are contributing our all — and we likely never will. More often than not, we let go of what we have only with guarantees in place, only after establishing fair transactional principles, or with promises of our names etched in large stones.

This story is eerily spot-on when it comes to that which attracts our attention — and what doesn't. And, we are rarely, if ever, drawn to those persons whom we do not want to be. In the end, none of us wishes to be her. She's a widow — and we know all too well the status of widows in the ancient world. Who desires to be alone, destitute, or dependent? She willingly gives all — and we know all too well that's something we are not going to do.

If I were to make this sermon say, “Be like her, give all you can” that assumes that we can actually imagine being in her place. And if we think that's true, then we are no better than the scribes — keeping up appearances, which often includes convincing ourselves that we are more altruistic than we actually are. And we are no better than the disciples, whose gaze is pulled to the grandeur of the temple stones.

Nowhere in this passage does Jesus praise the widow for what she is doing. He simply calls his disciples to notice the widow and compare what she does with what everyone else is doing. He points out the disparity between abundance and poverty, between large sums and two copper coins, between apparent sacrifice and the real thing. He simply points out that the major characters are minor givers, while the minor character turns out to be the major donor of all.

This is the last of Jesus' dizzy lessons in the upside-down kingdom of God, where the last shall be first and the great shall be servants of all, and the most unlikely people will turn out to have been Christ himself in disguise. The poor widow is his last case in point. When he leaves the temple with his disciples that day, his public ministry is over. In four days he will be dead, having uncurled his fingers from around his own offering, to give up the two copper coins of his life.

I think that is why he noticed the poor widow in the first place. She reminded him of someone. It was the end for her, it was the end for him, too. She withheld nothing from God, neither did he. “Look,” he said to those who meant to follow him, “That is what I have been talking about. Look at her.”

If Jesus were to take a snapshot of the temple on that day and show it to the disciples and ask, “Where is Christ in this picture?” They would never have guessed the answer. There were major characters in that picture: doctors of the law, patrons of the arts, rich people and smart people, people with names and faces.

When we sit here in church what do we see? We see the priest and the deacon wearing long robes and leading prayers. We see the chalice bearers and acolytes, also wearing long robes and leading the processions. But what don't we see? If we look out of the corner of our eye, we may see the prayer ministers meeting with members of the congregation during Communion. We may see the ushers working with latecomers and others who need help and bringing our gifts to the altar and assisting us to the rail. While we don't always see them, we hear the organist and the choir holding up their musical offering to us and God. Behind the scene there are the Sunday school teachers, toddler minders, hospitality providers, office staff, sexton, and Altar Guild who provide the oil for the machinery of the church to run smoothly, not to mention the oil for the candles to light our altar. And we never see those folks who go around after we leave and lock up the building. All these people are not the central players in the pageant that is Sunday morning, but they are crucial to its working. That is where Christ is in this picture: working quietly behind the major figures sacrificing their time, energy, and love to all the rest of us.