

There is a message in this story about discipleship lived from a sense of abundance, but I bristle a bit when I hear even the most well-meaning preacher walk this story as though it led inevitably to some version of a question that asks: “If this poor marginalized and destitute woman can give her sacrificial last coins for God’s holy work, how can those of us who have so much more justify not giving more?” Now, there is certainly some merit in that question, but there are also some assumptions and tones behind it that don’t feel sufficiently Christ-like and life-affirming for me.

Let me tell you a story: My sweet great-aunt Betty was in many ways a great deal like the widow woman, although Betty was never married. She was a tiny woman in her mid-80s when she moved to Seattle from Montana. Aunt Betty had no savings and only a pittance to live on. She was slightly developmentally delayed or “a little touched in the head” to use Montana’s unsophisticated if a bit insensitive parlance. Betty died in a basement studio apartment with her cat, the last in a long line of feline companions named “Miss Bunny,” although for reasons known only to Betty and God, she called her final cat “Miss Kitty.”

I was the executor of her will, which mostly meant I had to decide where to donate her little wardrobe, a small collection of atrocious wigs and her ancient TV, and to find a home for Miss Kitty, the insane or possibly possessed cat that had destroyed the wooden legs of Betty’s one chair. In going through her belongings after Betty died, I found that she had been habitually sending money to the televangelist, Bob Tilton, a man who wore \$2000 tailored Italian suits and lived in multimillion-dollar homes in San Diego, Dallas and on the waterfront in Fort Lauderdale. He is exactly the kind of

church leader, that is to say, the kind of scribe, that Jesus warned his followers to be cautious of.

All too often, I have heard preachers and commentators, especially during stewardship season, say something along the lines of: “Jesus is irritated at the scribes, who go to considerable effort to be noticed for their devotion and sacrifice. See instead how Jesus holds up the widow as an honorable example of faithful giving and authentic discipleship.”

The problem is that this interpretation bounces off the surface of the scripture and adds elements that just aren't there. There's something untenable about making the widow's story easy. Something in me doesn't want this story reduced to a naïve platitude intended to shame people into increasing our annual budget.

Jesus didn't say, “Don't be like the scribes.” In fact, in a passage shortly before this morning's reading, Jesus encountered a scribe who stood in solidarity with Jesus. The institutional body responsible for the temple may have been infected by corrupt and disconcerting practices, but not every scribe had lost the sense of purpose and priorities of their calling.

What Jesus *did* say to his followers was to beware of a specific kind of church official—those who exploited people on the margins for their own gain. He was warning them to be cautious of church leaders who prioritize their own status over the spiritual, financial, moral and emotional well-being of the congregation.

Jesus also did *not* say “don't be like those giving large sums of money” as though they are somehow lacking faith or are living as inauthentic followers. Instead, he clearly pointed out that they have given out of their abundance. I have to assume that some, maybe even most, of these people were motivated by a spirit of generous and loving purpose.

Mark's Jesus did draw his followers' attention to the widow. She was an extremely vulnerable woman living on the margins of first century Palestinian

society. Like my Aunt Betty, she had no husband and no sons to advocate for her. Unlike my Aunt Betty, she had no safety net, no family of origin to fall back on, no property or social status, or even a voice to speak on her own behalf. The widow was utterly defenseless. Two small copper coins away from the end.

Jesus saw her giving her last resources to a temple where some of the scribes had become so corrupt that they profited personally from her misery and from the desolation of those like her, who gave everything they had to live on. We never get to hear why the widow gave her last resources or what her state of mind was. Was she trusting and ecstatic? Was she despondent? Is this really a just cheerful story about giving in selflessness or could it be a tragic tale about giving up in surrender?

Jesus noticed that she, out of her poverty, had put in everything she had, *all she had to live on*. What that implies is that she very likely died a short time after. In the context of Mark's Gospel, Jesus himself died just four days after this event. Perhaps she died on the same day. In any case, we never hear about her again and so we can only hope that she died with dignity. But it begs the question: Why would Jesus praise the example of a destitute woman who gave her last penny to the temple and then slipped away to starve?

For several chapters leading up to this story, Mark's Jesus has been criticizing temple leaders and has delivered scathing critiques of the extractive, domineering and exploitative powers of empire and self-aggrandizement. So the warning about the corrupt scribe makes sense, but why now would Jesus hold up as an example a woman at the end of her resources for supporting the very powers that, up to this moment, he has been exposing and reprimanding?

The simple answer is this: he didn't. Read the story carefully; he never said "Be like the widow." Centuries of stewardship sermons notwithstanding,

Jesus never commended the widow, never applauded her self-sacrifice or prompted us to follow in her footsteps. He also never said “Don’t be like those putting great sums into the treasury.” He simply noticed *all* of these people and told his followers to notice them as well.

Without speaking a word, the widow acted prophetically in the tradition of Isaiah, Elijah and Jeremiah, all of whom in dramatic fashion drew attention to what right relationship with God should be like, especially when religious institutions have lost their way. The people who continued to give out of their abundance can be our encouragement that God stands ready to redirect us even when some of us have gone astray.

Four days after this story, Jesus gave his life—everything that he had and everything that he was—to redeem, restore and renew the world. What, then, shall we give in response? Corrupt scribes certainly represent one extreme to avoid and giving until it threatens our very existence represents another extreme for most of us. But there are kernels of wisdom in each extreme that guide us to the way to give ourselves entirely to God through a church that knows its purpose.

When the gifts of the people are brought to the altar, children and adults carry wine, bread and money from the back of the nave. These all come to the altar at the same time as the gifts of the people to be transformed into the gifts of God. The wine is made from grapes taken from God’s creation and transformed by human hands. The bread is made from wheat and honey taken from God’s creation and transformed by human hands. The money comes from the variety of gifts given by God that has been transformed by humans. Together, these represent all that we have been given, all that we are and all that we hope to be, given to God to be blessed and given to the world.

In this way, we become the coins of God’s new realm—all of who each one of us is uniquely and all that we are as a community. The purpose of this

place—St Elizabeth—is to be a place set aside and dedicated to the transformation of people. This place is a house of healing and prayer and a school for God’s service that forms us and sends us out to be sources of love, forgiveness, justice and mercy.

That’s what it means to give everything we have back to God: to offer our very being, that which God created each of us to be, in service to God’s creation. Just as we are not serving God by supporting those who clutch at God’s abundance entirely for themselves, neither do we need to surrender everything we have been given to live on until our existence comes to an end. To be the coins of God’s new realm is to live! To live unafraid of death, but to live transformed. To live unattached to what we have been given or even what we have earned. To live as the coins of God’s new realm is to offer ourselves to God to be carriers of God’s love, grace and hope—each of us a shining coin in God’s new economy.