



Do You See That Woman?

TEXT
Mark 12:41-44

April 9, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

It's just been a couple of days since the crowds were waving palm branches and shouting hosanna. And Jesus sits down across from the temple treasury to watch the people there. I wonder if this was a moment he took for himself.

This is a complicated moment in the ministry of Jesus — complicated enough that biblical scholars struggle to know how to interpret this moment. I'm not claiming to know the answer, but I will tell you what I see.

Jesus sits across from the temple treasury and watches. There are folks bringing offerings. The temple was surrounded by 13 chests of trumpet-like shape, known as *shoperoths*, a word that means "trumpets." It was into these that the faithful could put their offerings. These were not hidden deep inside the sanctuary, only available to those who came in to worship, but outside where the public gathered. This made it easier for folks to contribute. It made it possible for folks who would not be allowed inside to make contributions — like this widow woman. And it made it easier for contributors to be seen, which was a happy circumstance for some.

On this day, Jesus sat across from the treasury. He wasn't

teaching. He wasn't performing miracles. He just watched.

He saw the faithful come to make their offerings to God. There were people of great wealth who made large gifts, lots of coins that no doubt clattered their way down those trumpet boxes. It was a holy sound, I suppose.

Jesus just sat and watched. I don't know what he was looking for. Who knows if he knew what he was looking for, but all of a sudden he calls his disciples. "Look," he says, "do you see that woman?"

Time is drawing close now. He knew that. So he busied himself trying to pour into his followers all the kingdom teaching he could pour into them. He taught a rich man about making friends with the poor. He taught James and John about humility. He taught all who would listen that the kingdom could only be received as a little child.

He taught the scribes and Pharisees about the greatest commandment, and about resurrection, and even about paying taxes. But now he just wants his disciples to look at her. She has given "all she has to live on," the text reads. It sounds like she emptied her wallet. But the Greek is actually more significant. The Greek says she has given her whole --- *bios ... her whole life*.

I think that's why Jesus notices her.

It's a complicated text. It's complicated because some say this is a really good moment; that Jesus speaks here with gratitude in his voice. Others say no, this is a terrible moment and Jesus speaks with sadness, even indignation in his voice. Why would they say that?

They are remembering what Jesus said in verse 40, the verse immediately before this text. Jesus speaks a warning about the scribes, and this is what he says: "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

Did you hear it? Stuck in between all the hypocritical religious practice, Jesus condemns the scribes for devouring widows' houses. They care more about widows' money than widows themselves, and they reduce these women to mere bit parts in life.

Some say that our two-coin widow is Exhibit A of what Jesus condemns. Jesus is not really pointing to this woman, but rather

pointing to the corruption in the temple. Like some TV preacher who promises if you just send in your Social Security check, they will put in a good word with God for you. The temple is abusing the poor.

Well, that was going on then. It goes on now. It's not a rare thing for some folks to use religion to take advantage of their neighbor or their enemy.

And Jesus was angry about it. "Beware of the scribes . . . they devour widows' houses." Some say Jesus wants his disciples to see this woman so that they will grow angry and never, in the name of God, let someone give away their whole life.

I think that is part of this story. Jesus was keenly sensitive to how institutions and those in power abused those with lesser or no power. It made him angry. But I wonder if there is also something else is going on. I wonder if Jesus points her out because he sees something in her that reminds him of himself.

From the beginning of his ministry, he has been teaching and preaching about the kingdom of God. And no one gets it. The religious leaders didn't get it. They had reduced faith in God to religious protocol and doctrinal disputes. His followers weren't getting it. They still thought he was going to make them great somehow — that he would be great, and it would rub off on them.

But I think he notices her because he sees something in her that is just like him. "The widow is not unlike Jesus, who will also soon give his last red cent not to inflate the corrupt temple treasury

but to redeem God's beloved world."¹ I think Jesus sees something of himself in her. She gives all she has to an institution that is not worthy of her gift. The giving grows not from the worthiness of the church, but from the grace and faith of the woman. Jesus notices her because she does something God would do.

Is this a bad moment? In part. Is this a good moment? Yes. Like many moments, it's a mixture of beauty and brokenness.

It may seem a small thing, but I find it meaningful that Jesus sees this kind of sacrifice. He knows about sacrifice, and when it happens, he can't help but notice. *Do you see, look now, do you see that woman?*

Fran gave birth to Jeffery. When he was born, Fran's husband left her. I don't know for sure, but I imagine it was because Jeffery was too much. He was autistic. Fran worked at a Presbyterian home as an activities director — organizing trips in the fall to see the leaves and trips to the beauty shop and exercise that you could do from your chair. The folks at the Presbyterian home loved Fran, but it was clear to me that the reason she worked was so that she could take care of Jeffery.

He had no speech, but he cruised the church hallways as if at home. He would be the first in line to get a cookie after worship and sometimes would stand there while he ate four or five cookies. Even at age 17, he would sometimes crawl under the tables in fellowship hall. He would bounce in the pews and would get up and walk around the sanctuary when he wanted to.

Every day, Fran was there for Jeffery. The money she made at the Presbyterian home went to make sure Jeffery got his medicines and was able to get to special schools. She ate all her meals with Jeffery. Fran never dated; she never went to movies; she never went out, except on Thursday nights for choir practice, when she could bring Jeffery. He seemed to enjoy the music.

If you watched, you would see that Fran poured all of her energy into Jeffery — that in his world, he might know someone loved him, someone would be faithful to him; that in his broken-down world, maybe he would trust someone saw him and loved him. When it came to sacrificing anything for that child, Fran would do it. In her lonely world, she lived like this widow woman. She gave her life.

And I imagine Jesus watches my friend Fran, and he calls the saints and angels and points to her: "Do you see that woman? She looks so much like me."

Some say the temple was corrupt and abusive and broken-down, and it wouldn't last; and all of that is true. But in this world, that's always true of temples and churches; it's true of families and businesses; it's true of communities and institutions. The workings of this world are always a mixture of beauty and brokenness.

This is important because we might be willing to sacrifice, as long as that for which we sacrifice is worthy. That seems reasonable. But we also should be grateful that Jesus wasn't concerned about such things.

John walked the neighborhood every day. And he played the

piano every day. When he walked, Martha walked with him. They had been married about 20 years, a second marriage for the both of them. But now John's mind was slipping away — almost overnight it seemed. Martha used to teach the children during church school, but she stopped that because she couldn't leave John.

She went with him everywhere to make sure he didn't get lost. She listened as he told her the same things over and over and over again. She took him with her to the grocery, and to get his hair cut, and to the doctor. She never left his side.

I asked her how she was holding up. She said, "Tom, this is the hardest walk of my life. The marriage I knew packed up sometime during the night of this disease, and it left us in this long walk of caregiving. But I will walk with him until the end."

His children didn't come around often; they didn't know how to process their dad, who had been a much-respected physician who now struggled to put sentences together. But when it came to making sure that John was cared for, Martha poured everything she had into his life.

And I am sure that there were long days and some unending nights when she felt the world had lost her, had passed her by, but I am confident Jesus gathers the saints and angels and says, "Do you see that woman? She looks exactly like me."

We live in a corrupt and broken-down world. The world broke our hearts again this week: children lining the streets in Syria.² Less well-known, children are

too weak to cry in South Sudan, as famine is destroying the nation. The Red Cross in Africa suggests that as many as 32 million people in the region are facing extreme food insecurity, and that as many as 20 million people could die in the next several months — 20 million.³

This morning, Christians in Egypt went to church to sing hosanna and were brutalized by bombs. Many have died.

There are schools that are failing our children, and there is poverty that is crucifying dreams. It is a corrupt and broken-down world. But it is this world that Jesus gave his whole life for. And it mattered. It may not be celebrated in this world, but it counted in heaven. It counts for something. It counts because it is after "God's own heart."

Jesus was sitting across from the temple. It's a place where people sacrifice for something beyond themselves. And he said there, "Did you see that woman? She gave her life."

From the first day, I have been telling you about the kingdom of God. It's like a sower who sows. It's like a banquet for five thousand. It's like demons being cast out. It's like your blind eyes being opened. It's like the children singing hosanna. It's like that woman ... she gave her life. Jesus pays attention to sacrifices like that.⁴

The palms were already browning. The mood of the songs was changing. And Jesus took a moment just to watch. And I don't know, but I wonder if he took this moment for himself. And I wonder if once he saw this unnamed widow woman, a woman he may

have never even spoken to; but once he saw her, I wonder if he thought, "If she can give her life away, I can give my life away."

And I wonder, when he looks now at us and the sacrifices we make, when we make them, I wonder if he sees that and calls all the angels and saints in heaven to say, "Look at them, they are so much like me."

¹Blount & Charles, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices* (2002), p. 203

²This week an attack with chemical weapons was launched in Syria, killing many innocent people, including children.

³Time.com Aryn Baker "By the Time We Declare a Famine It's Already Too Late." Feb 22, 2017

⁴I am indebted to Jon Walton, pastor of First Presbyterian Church, New York, New York, for this final paragraph. His thoughts presented to the Moveable Feast in January 2003 have greatly influenced the direction of this sermon.

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.