

November 7, 2021
Mark 12:38-44
Stacy Rector

The Widow's Might

It is good to be here today, together with you again for a time to reflect, to pray, to sing, to listen, to worship. And we are here, despite COVID, despite the inflation rate, despite the division and gridlock, despite the peddling of disinformation and delusion, we are here.

Perhaps though we are a bit disoriented. I know I am. I tell folks on a regular basis that the past few years have impacted my sense of time so profoundly that I am not sure if something happened last week, last month, last year. It all runs together in a timeless blur.

Maybe my brain has decided it has finally had enough, and rather than filing the barrage of constant information and life-altering events by categories of time, it just throws them all into the same pot and stirs. I don't know. But I do know that the information overload, images flashing on so many screens, ominous sound bytes and headlines, tweets and tweets and more tweets, 24 hour news cycle, don't help my addled brain at all.

And then, thrown into this soup, is the ability to manipulate our image or the image of others through social media with the click of a button—profiles, statuses, likes, dislikes, followers, and whatever else there is.

Recently, Facebook made the news again after revelations that its own in-depth company research demonstrated that 32% of teen girls surveyed by the company already had negative body images, and after visiting Facebook's Instagram, with its photos of chiseled bodies and flawless faces, the girls felt much worse. One slide from an internal Facebook presentation stated, "We make body image issues worse for one in three teen girls."

Now since this revelation, more researchers have cautioned that the data is not peer reviewed and the samples are small. But, one independent researcher interviewed by NPR did say that what this research does suggest is that for a small group of severely depressed teens, social media has a

bigger impact both for better and for worse. And the hard truth is that Facebook publicly downplayed their own data, which the company believed showed that its content was harmful to teen girls, while working to expand its base to these same users, as young people are critical to the more than \$100 billion in the company's annual revenue. Image making and breaking are both big business after all.

We certainly have more tools today to manipulate and misrepresent our image or the image of others, but humans have always been skilled at it. We are insecure beings, after all, constantly comparing ourselves to others, longing for acceptance, and thus we create and foster personas that we believe makes us more important, or more beautiful, or credible, or more necessary. We are all tempted to fudge a bit about who we really are as the perceived risk of rejection by others, by God, or even by ourselves, is just too great.

Obviously church folks are not immune, and in fact, may be some of the most eager to present a life of decency and order, when in fact, our lives are nothing of the sort. In like manner, we in the church are also often most attracted to those whose image conveys an air of importance—the big givers, the movers and shakers, the “winners”—too often overlooking the immense gifts of those whose image may not be so polished or whose pockets may not be so full.

So we can be hard on the scribes portrayed in Mark's text today, but the temptation is real for us too, when our desire for recognition, for praise, for admiration, trumps our desire for authenticity and leaves us so caught up in the image of our own making that we fail to see God's image in others, and maybe even in ourselves.

In our text, Jesus has entered Jerusalem for his final confrontation, a confrontation which will lead to a cross, stripping him of all semblance of an honorable image. He goes to the Temple, the center of religious life for the Jewish people, but which, at the same time, has also become a place of exploitation by Rome and some of the religious elite.

Let me stop at this point and give you a bit of background on the temple system of Jesus' time. The temple which Jesus now enters was constructed by King Herod, a ruthless King appointed by the Romans, who intended for

this particular temple to reflect, not God's glory, but his own. He fit the massive structure with royal colonnades, large courtyards, and elaborate gates, skillfully combining the history of Israel with Rome's ideology of empire, complete with a soaring golden eagle of Rome affixed on the main gate.

In this temple, the Roman official appointed all the high priests and even kept their robes in his possession, releasing them only for the ceremonial occasions in which the priests would officiate. The religion of the Temple had become the political, social, and economic engine which served the elites. Some of the elite members of the high priestly class, as well as the Romans, benefited most from the system as it provided religious justification for their exploitation, exploitation which took the form of requiring tithes, sacrifices, and temple taxes in order to fill their own pockets while robbing the poor of their very means of survival.

The Temple, much like the church in the U.S. today, struggled to maintain its co-opted identity in order to try to be the temple of which Isaiah spoke—a place for gathering outcasts and a place of prayer for all people.

Understanding this context better explains Jesus' reaction as he now observes some of the religious elites in their finery with all eyes upon them reciting their eloquent prayers.

Jesus takes his seat facing the treasury to watch the spectacle. The rich stream in—looking pretty and smelling good—dropping their large checks into the plate. He is sure that they know that he is watching and how they enjoy being watched. But even in the midst of all the pomp and circumstance, out of the corner of his eye, Jesus sees her—a frail woman, worn clothes from the local clothes closet hanging from hunched shoulders. No one else even notices her. But then, no one ever does. She is one of the invisible people—the people who sleep on park benches and under bridges, those who line up weekly at the food bank and the free clinic, those who may have to choose each month between groceries or prescriptions, invisible people, but not to Jesus.

The widow makes her way forward and deposits her two coins, mites in the King James English, equal to about a penny—coins of which our sofa cushions and car trays are full. As Jesus watches her calloused fingers

release the paltry coins, he calls his disciples over saying, “Truly this poor widow has put in more than all the others for they have given out of their abundance; but she, out of her poverty, has given all she had to live on.” Jesus wants the disciples to see her and to learn from her.

This story is often told as a lesson in generosity, and surely this vulnerable widow is a mighty teacher in the art of giving. Though, no one can call her a model of moderation. She does not submit to cautious examination or deliberation as to whether she can afford the gift. She does not excuse herself from giving because of her dire circumstances, though none of us would blame her if she did.

Instead, she gives because she can't help it really. She gives because with every day that she is able rise off her mat and work, with every morsel of food that goes into her hungry belly, with every child's giggle, with every sunset, with every moment no matter how satisfying or how painful, she knows that she belongs to God, that she is made in God's own image, that everyday is a gift, and that it is God who is the giver. How can she help but give back?

And, she gives believing that no one will ever even notice. No one will name the new education building in her honor nor will her name be etched on a plaque in some hallway. Her gift is barely worth the effort of counting it, and yet it is unmatched in the way that it counts to God. She, in her love and devotion, offers to God all that she is and all that she has. Her coins are a pittance, but her faith is extravagant.

I can almost feel the lump in Jesus' throat as he watches this widow dropping these coins into the offering plate, giving all she has to an institution that is not worthy of it.

And with that, Jesus exits the temple for the final time. In a few days, he will be dead, and though she doesn't know it, the widow teaches Jesus something too. In her sacrifice in that temple, she helps to prepare Jesus for what he will face. She gives him the gift of encouragement and of clarity, for through her selfless act, Jesus becomes ever more aware of what is to come for him, when he too will give everything away for a world not worthy of him.

During my time as Associate Pastor here at Second, between the departure of one pastor and the arrival of another, as you all know too well, the church building caught fire and a great portion of it, including our beautiful sanctuary, was destroyed. In the days after the fire, the outpouring from the community was overwhelming. People were so generous in their support of us and in their desire to see us rise from the ashes. But, there is one gift that stands out in my mind...one gift that I will never forget, a lesson in giving that I learned from an unlikely teacher.

A young man who I will call Joe, who was raised at Second Presbyterian, attending church and Sunday school through his formative years, sadly became involved with drugs in his early twenties. Joe sank deeper and deeper into a life of drug abuse until his world came tumbling down around him. Two men were killed in a drug deal gone bad, and Joe was charged with and convicted of two counts of murder. He pleaded guilty and was sentenced to life in prison. Joe's arrest and sentencing occurred just before I arrived at Second in 1997, and I remember accompanying Joe's grandmother to the Davidson County Jail to see him as one of my first pastoral visits.

When the fire happened, years had past. Joe was in a state prison out of town. Joe's grandmother continued to visit him, but I had not seen or heard from him in some time. In the days after the fire, days that are a blur to me, our session gathered regularly to try to manage the situation. I remember one meeting, next door in the house around a big table, Ralph Mosley opened an envelope and read us a letter from Joe.

It seems that Joe had turned on his prison TV that September morning and had been shocked to see his beloved church swallowed up in flames. The church that loved him, regardless of his failings, who supported him, a man whose public image was now solely that of a criminal--a convicted, drug-dealing murderer. In prison, Joe had a job making 30 or 40 cents an hour, which he used to purchase his commissary items like toothpaste and soap, the bare minimum for maintaining his health and some measure of dignity.

Ralph finished reading the letter and reached back into the envelope. He pulled out a check with all the money that Joe had in his prison account. Joe sent it to our church in order to help with the rebuilding. In light of the amount of money we needed, it was a paltry sum. But of all the gifts that we

received, his is the one that I continue to carry with me for it was likely one of the most extravagant gifts this church, or any church, has ever received.

As we continue to navigate these uncertain times with so many competing images and narratives about who and whose we are, let us pray that we be reminded each day, and that we remind each other on every occasion we can, that first and foremost, we, all of us, are made in the image of God, the God who meets us in a Jewish man from Nazareth, Jesus the Christ. And knowing this truth, may we be less concerned with the image we portray and more concerned with the faith that we live. May we put our trust in the great Giver to provide for our needs, freeing us to give lavishly and from our hearts; and that as Christ's people, may we look beyond images and pedigrees to see and learn from those in our midst who might not look like all that much, but might well be Jesus himself.

I want to leave you with a quote from C.S. Lewis' *Surprised by Joy* as a charge to us all as we head back out into the world to humbly follow our brother Jesus, the One who invites us to this table to share in his goodness, love, and acceptance:

Give up your self, and you will find your real self.
Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death,
death of your ambitions and favorite wishes every
day and death of your whole body in the end: submit
with every fiber of your being and your will. Find
eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have
not given away will ever really be yours. Nothing in
you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead.

Thanks be to God. Amen.