

JESUS, SCRIBES and WIDOWS ... and us all

A meditation on Mark 8:12-44

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 market-places, 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.'

I thought that these two stories from the Gospel of Mark would be easy to preach from. I would have little difficulty, I thought, in drawing the congregation into an encounter with our Lord. I figured that since I'm so familiar with these two pericopes from the life of Jesus, heard so many sermons on them, assumed others had as well, I wouldn't need to work very hard. All I'd need to do is remind the people of the seemingly obvious and typical applications. *Don't* be like the scribes who love and demand attention. *Do* be like the poor widow who gave sacrificially to the work of God in the temple. End of sermon! Go home!

Then I remembered Abraham Heschel's warning: When you read, he said, don't see what you already know. *Know what you see*. So I put aside all my preconceived ideas about this text, all those familiar interpretations, and began reading again. To my surprise, I found myself seeing things I'd never noticed before because old interpretations got in the way. Ellen Davis, I discovered is correct when she claimed, "I am convinced that in every place the Bible is pushing us to think in ways that do not come naturally."¹ I was being pushed to think in ways that didn't come naturally to me. So I invite you to join me in knowing what you see in these two familiar stories from the life of Jesus and, be pushed, along with me to think in ways that do not necessarily come naturally, open to seeing new ways of living in the Way of Jesus.

Let me begin with the setting. These two events took place within the temple precincts during the final weeks, if not days, of Jesus' earthly ministry. Mark places them at the end of a series of confrontational dialogues between Jesus and the religious leaders. First came the Pharisees, then the Sadducees and finally the scribes, each one with their own trick question, hoping Jesus would be trapped into saying something to discredit himself. Each time, Jesus

¹ In Davis and Hays 2008: 279.

confounded them, demonstrating his wisdom and authority and leaving the crowd gasping with amazement. After the last one, Mark writes, “After that no one dared ask him any questions” (v34). Can’t say that I blame them!

At this point, there is a slight change and Jesus controls the topic for teaching. He remains within the temple precincts and continues to address the crowd, choosing to focus attention on two groups of people. The first group is the scribes, the teachers of the Law of Moses. Although scribes were not from wealthy classes, they were among the most influential in Judaism because of their authority on the *Torah*, the Law of Moses. It gave them the power to judge whether a worshiper was clean or unclean, and thus whether they could or couldn’t enter God’s presence on any given day. The second group is widows. The very opposite of scribes, widows were among the least powerful in society and the most vulnerable, easy victims of exploitation. Since both these stories mention widows, we can assume that they belong together, even though that doesn’t seem immediately obvious.

BEWARE! SCRIBES!

Addressing the crowd there at the temple, Jesus in the first story gives a very obvious warning. “Beware of the scribes,” he said. It seems reasonable to believe that in Jesus’ thinking, scribes were a clear and present danger to the ordinary folk and he gives us two reasons why he believed this. First, they both loved and demanded attention, making themselves rather than God the centre of consideration. Jesus’ warning paints a picture of a rather pathetic group of people who drew attention to themselves by wearing their long religious robes at all times, which would make them easily recognizable as teachers and authorities on the Law and thus get them the respectful greetings, perhaps even discounts, in the market places. They loved the best seats in the synagogue, those up front, with their backs to God’s Word, protecting it from the people who sat facing them. And they expected to be given places of honour at banquets, presumably so that they could be served first. There is something about this ostentatious show of behavior that Jesus objected to, perhaps because it was hypocritical. Preachers have used this story to warn Christians to avoid this kind of behavior that loves and demands attention. While this is a good general suggestion, it fails to notice Jesus wasn’t speaking *to*, but *about* scribes. We, the ordinary people, are warned to avoid being taken in by powerful, showy leaders. In other words, we are reminded of the need for discernment. But this wasn’t all.

Mark adds another descriptive sentence about scribes that is a little tricky to understand. He writes, “They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.” We have to wonder why widows and long prayers are dragged in at this point, and in the same sentence. Let me begin with devouring widows’ houses. It seems that scribes used their position as the teachers and authorities on the Law of Moses to get financial support. They lacked private finances, weren’t in salaried teaching positions, and their lifestyle of ‘look-at-me-with-respect’ cost money. They relied on the generosity of others to pay their way and keep them out of poverty. Widows, those left with some means of support, were easy prey for their manipulative techniques to get money. The scribes “devoured” widows, suggesting they drained them of their personal finances.

In the same sentence, Jesus also claims that scribes “for sake of appearance say long prayers.” This suggests that these two things, devouring widows’ houses and saying long prayers, belong together. It begs the questions: Did the scribe promise to offer long prayers provided the widow paid him big money? There is no way of knowing for sure, but it does seem a likely possibility. And, of course, teachers of God’s Word, including priests, have been known in the history of Christianity to do exactly this. It was one of the reasons that led to the Protestant Reformation under Martin Luther. Whatever this sentence means, it appears that the most powerful, the teachers of the Mosaic Law, were exploiting the least powerful, widows, the very ones Moses commanded them to protect and support. It is this exploitation, more than the showy demanding behavior of the scribes that Jesus denounced with very harsh words: “They will receive the greater condemnation.” You see this story from the Bible pushes us to think in new ways. The application is not about avoiding behavior that places ‘me’ at the center. The application has to do with avoiding manipulation of the most vulnerable in society.

Amazingly, there is no reaction to these words from Jesus; no cheering from the crowd who’d no doubt experienced some exploitation from the scribes and no uprising in defense of their actions from the scribes. Mark simply begins another story. The change is so abrupt in Mark’s Gospel that it’s not surprising many readers and preachers have assumed the two stories are entirely unrelated and thus treat them separately, coming to entirely different applications – don’t be like the scribes; do be like the poor widow. But, I believe the church got it right, when it put these two stories together in the church lectionary. They are not entirely separate, even

though it may seem that way at first glance, and the interpretation and application of each is related.²

A POOR WIDOW

In Mark, Jesus' teaching to the crowd ceases, marking this warning as Jesus' last public act. With no explanation, Jesus abruptly sat down opposite the treasury and watched the crowd putting in their money. Personally, I think this must have been very intimidating for the givers! He sees many rich giving large sums. Perhaps they behaved in a manner I've seen in Lesotho, where people waved their bills in the air as they walked up front and deposited them in the offering plate. Well, only those making large contributions did that! I imagine the rich jingling their large bags of coins for all to see and hear before dropping them into the treasury. Jesus is quite unmoved.

Then a poor widow came and put in what amounted to 'peanuts,' "two small copper coins, which are worth a penny." The old King James Version refers to her offering as "two mites, which are a farthing." We don't know the actual value today. Copper coins were of the least value in that day; two might buy her one meager meal and no more. Mark makes a point of describing the widow as "poor," a contrast to the first mention of widows in the earlier story. There is no descriptive adjective there. Seeing her offering and its contrast to the large sums of the rich, Jesus immediately called his disciples and gives teaching only to them.³

It seems, at first reading, that the common assumption that Jesus was here commending the widow and holding her up as an example of how we should give, is correct. In contrast to the words of warning about scribes in the first story, these, many believed, are words of commendation. Jesus appears to be criticizing all the givers who gave out of their abundance and commending the poor widow who gave out of her poverty. He is, we've been told, holding up this widow as an example of how we should give. As a result, this story has been used to encourage us all to follow the poor widow's example of sacrificial giving. Like her, I've heard preachers claim, we should give until it hurts; it's not what goes into the plate but what is left behind that matters, people proclaim, adding, this is the way Jesus wants us to give and therefore he commended this poor widow.

² By the way, Luke's account is less abrupt, suggesting the two stories belong together. While Jesus was teaching, according to Luke, "He looked up and saw rich people.; he also saw a poor widow..." (21:1). The rest of the details are similar to Mark's account.

³ This detail, that the teaching was given only to Jesus' disciples, is not in Luke's account. Mark is deliberately choosing to emphasize this in order to highlight that the message is for the Church, both then and today.

Reading and interpreting these two stories together calls into question this common interpretation. If this is a commendation of the poor widow's giving, why did Jesus give it privately, only to his disciples? Why not give it to the crowd and the widow? There is no indication in Mark that she even heard what Jesus said about her. You would think she would have benefited from hearing him and that the rich givers would have realized their giving was unsatisfactory. As I wondered about this, I began seeing 3 things I'd missed before.

First, Mark makes a big deal about her poverty, referring to it no less than five times. He first describes her as a poor widow. Second, when Jesus refers to her he too uses the adjective *poor* to describe her. He then says, that, in contrast to all those others, she “out of her poverty [3rd] has put in everything she had [4th], all she had to live on [5th time].” She was poorer than poor and yet she gave her all. It occurred to me that this kind of giving is irresponsible. We could expect a gentle rebuke from Jesus, or an assurance she didn't have to give everything, or even better, dipping his hand into the treasury to give her money back to her with interest. But Jesus doesn't do any of those things, simply turns to his disciples, and I wonder: Why not? I also wonder why this poor widow would give away everything she had. What prompted such irresponsible giving?

That got me thinking about a second question: Had this poor widow, a vulnerable person at best, been exploited by others more powerful than her? This takes us back to our first story and Jesus' condemnation of scribes who “devour widows' houses.” This is not a separate story, with an unrelated application. It belongs with the poor widow's story and we need to seek a single application. Was the poor widow a victim of scribal 'devouring'? Did she give so sacrificially because a scribe told it was her duty to do so, perhaps even assured her (as I've heard preachers say) that God would give back a hundred-fold? Or, did a scribe promise to offer long prayers for her if she gave once again to the temple treasury? We don't know, but it seems a possible interpretation.

This led me to a third possibility. If the poor widow was a victim of scribal exploitation, are Jesus' words to his disciples words of warning and not commendation? Instead of using the poor widow as an example, encouraging us to give sacrificially, Jesus was warning us once again of the scribes who exploit the poor and vulnerable. The story is a another warning to the Church today to avoid the manipulative behavior of the scribes, the teachers of God's Word, to guard against exploiting the most vulnerable in the church and in society. Therefore, to use this story

of the widow's sacrifice as a way to guilt congregations into giving more sacrificially to the church's projects seems to me to be nothing less than acting like the scribes of whom Jesus says, "Beware!" And also, "They will receive the greater condemnation."

CONCLUSION

These two stories belong together. They are not contrasting stories, with the one presenting a warning to avoid scribal showy behaviour and the second offering encouragement to give more sacrificially. Both are stories of warning. Since the teaching in the second story about the poor widow was directed exclusively, according to Mark, to Jesus' disciples, the warning is to the church of Christ, that is, you and me today. The widow's giving is not meant to be used to guilt us all into giving more sacrificially, even if we all can and should be more willing to give generously to God's work. There is no encouragement here: "do be like the widow and give until it hurts." There is only a warning: "avoid manipulative leaders who exploit the weak and vulnerable, the very ones we are command to protect and support; do not be like the scribes." You see how the Bible continues to push us to think in ways that do not come naturally to us?

Those of us who are in positions of influence, however large or small, are being called to check our behavior towards the weak and vulnerable around us and help them avoid the traps of manipulative leaders. Those who are the weak and vulnerable are been given permission to resist manipulative leaders and refuse to give of their money or time or talents in ways that are irresponsible.

In singling out the poor widow, Jesus was not leaving us with an example of how to give. Rather, he was reminding us yet again of our responsibility to protect the vulnerable from leaders who exploit them in whatever way, preying on their weakness. And so I leave you with a challenge: In what ways is this Gospel story pushing you to think and act today?

By Jackie Smallbones © 2009.

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