

Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then 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. For 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 came up with these ‘ditties’ about this passage earlier in the week that may bear repeating:

There once was a widow of prayer
whose pantry was utterly bare,
when all else was spent
she gave her last cent
as God’s own daughter and heir.

There once was a woman of Zion
with nought but her faith to rely on,
as she came to God’s house
rich fools saw a mouse
but to Jesus she was a lion.

Somewhere in the writings of Catholic priest and storyteller, John Shea (who I refer to fairly often) I came across a story about a widow that fits in here. The widow lived in Chicago had a son who went to a Catholic school. The priest there told him he needed five dollars to say a Mass for his deceased father. If a Mass is not said for him, the priest says, his father ‘Will never see God in the face.’ The boy is very distraught. He goes home to his mother with tears in his eyes and tells his mother; “Dad will never see God in the face if we don’t have a mass said.” The widow gives her son the five dollars, and he gives it to the priest who says the Mass. A little later, the priest corners the boy with the same message. His deceased father will never see God in the face without more masses said. The distressed boy begs his mother for another five dollars. “If we don’t,” he says, “Dad will never see God in the face.”

The widow holds her ground. “Then let him have a look at God’s backside,” she says...

Then, Shea goes on to say that the very same widow was the first to be there at the early

Sunday mass, unflinchingly faithful and generous with her offering... To Jesus, she indeed was a lion.

The long-ago widow of this Gospel story might or might not have had the same chutzpah of the modern widow who could distinguish the parts of God's anatomy; but she definitely acts with admirable resolve and determination.

The story of the widow's mite is one of those endearing, positive stories that if not found in the Bible would surely be found in folklore somewhere else. It is a celebration of the simple virtues of generosity, humility and quiet devotion shared out of love.

There is a similar story to this in rabbinic literature in a commentary on Leviticus. Jesus' value system echoed teachings of some of the rabbis: "A priest rejected the offering of a handful of grain from a poor widow. That night, in a dream he was commanded by an angel: "Do not despise her; receive what she brings. It is as if she had offered her life."

In the gospels, widows often draw Jesus' attention. In this instance, seated opposite the temple treasury, while "people-watching" with the disciples near the offering chests in the court of the women, they eyed this scene. The Mishnah speaks of "shofar-chests" that is, offering boxes with trumpet-shaped openings; made with ram's horns; easy to put money in, hard to get out. Jesus sees well-off patrons throwing in their large, clanging offerings, but focuses his words on someone unexpected, otherwise insignificant- but not in his eyes.

A widow approached the alms box cautiously, wrapped in black, scarf over her head, her face mostly covered, unaccompanied by a man.

She pulled from her purse two *leptons*, from the Greek word for 'thin'; the smallest coins in circulation, worth approximately 1/128 of what a laborer might expect to earn in a day. The King James Version calls these coins *mites*, modern translations call them pennies, but whatever you call them, they were not worth much.

If you were to place one in the open palm of your hand, you could blow it away like a feather. That she places two coins is significant.

She could have kept one for herself. She does not.

Jesus points her out as a model to his disciples.

There are two things that are memorable about this story besides the obvious plot-twist of the least likely giving the most generously. One has to do with *how much* she gave, and the other has to do with *to whom* she gave what she did.

Another story that closely resembles this one is an account of a woman at the home of

Simon, a leper. It takes place during Holy week, traditionally on Monday, coming up soon.

A woman came to the dinner party where Jesus attended, with an alabaster jar of nard, a very costly ointment, and she broke open the jar and poured it on Jesus' head, a lavish display of extravagance. The disciples criticized her because the oil could have been sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor, or so they said. But Jesus defended her because he said she was anointing his body for burial, linking what she did with his death.

It is not much of a stretch to link these two stories of these women and their costly acts to what Jesus himself does, because he gives an overwhelming amount, like the woman with the ointment who anointed him, like the widow who gave all that she had. For Jesus, it would be his whole life that he would pour out and give away on the cross, an extravagant act beyond description, a metric against which our generosity pales.

That said, it's also important to ask about the recipient of the widow's generosity. After all, she gave all that she had *to the temple*.

And while on the face of it, that might sound like a good place to give your most generous gift, in truth, gifts given to the temple in Jesus' time may not have been all that wisely given.

Money entrusted to the temple was money used to support the very scribes whom Jesus criticized as hypocrites, those who were still in line to be criticized by the prophets, - who sought to divide rather than to unite.

The money given to the temple supported a compromised institution with morally suspect leaders at its head.

But, as the story is told, the widow's gift was not given to support the corruption of the temple but given in spite of it. That is part of why the story is remembered at all. And there is a certain honor conferred in the widow's gift, given out of a pure motive, regardless of what happened to it after that. By her gift she established a higher accountability for the institution to which she gave; that the least coin of the most generous giver must always be faithfully used.

Somehow, this unnamed ancient woman's giving reminds me of something of what they say about prayer-... that I pray not so much to change God, but that I might be changed

myself.

In the same way, I give, not so much that I will change the world (though I hope my giving helps), but rather, that my giving changes me. I know that my \$5 will make a difference for a 5th grader at Walter P. Carter who has a book to take home & read. I know my weekly contribution helps keep the heat on, resources our own ministries and mission here, and that it also works its way, through our Presbyterian pipeline, through our One Great Hour of Sharing Offering, to mission projects overseas as well.

I'm sure each one of us tries our best to be a faithful steward of what we're given; and in our giving we send our best to make a difference.

Jesus shared this story with a twist to catch us off guard, and in fact we may not at first quite understand what he means.

I'm not sure the twelve disciples did at first, either.

I have to think, though, that at an evening meal, not so long after having watched the widow share her small but meaningful offering and telling this story, the disciples began to connect some dots. The widow gave all of what she had. It was a small offering, but it was everything. With her small gift she was a lion.

At table with the disciples and at least three women, Mary, Joanna, Susanna, Jesus took bread and the cup, shared words and prayers, made a small gesture of solidarity with those he journeyed with- marking the covenant God made with him, and passing it on to others. In the same way he includes us in the promise- that God will make good both our gifts, and our lives, dedicated to service in Jesus' way.

This small gift that we're given at the table today represents more than we could possibly ask for.

Amen.