

DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?

Rev. Jason Santalucia

A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church
in Brookfield, Connecticut
on November 7, 2021

Text: Mark 12:38-44

Jesus Denounces the Scribes

As 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, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'

The Widow's Offering

He 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.'

We find Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem this morning, verbally sparring with a group of scribes who aren't actually interested in having an honest debate. They just want to trick Jesus into saying something they can use against him. They keep asking him one ridiculous question after another, hoping he'll slip up and say something scandalous, but he doesn't take the bait. He keeps turning the questions back onto the questioners and making them look foolish.

Eventually they give up and go away, and Jesus turns to the crowd that's been standing there listening, including his own disciples, and he gives them a little sermon on injustice. He tells them to beware of the kind of people he was just talking to. They look righteous on the outside, but on the inside they're complete phonies. They go out of their way to seem pious, and then they turn around and prey on the weak and do things like cheat widows out of their houses.

When he gets done preaching, Jesus takes a little break. He sits down across from the treasury and watches all the rich people putting money into the coffers. They're bringing their offerings, and they're giving huge amounts, but to them it's just pocket change. Then along comes someone who happens to perfectly illustrate what Jesus was just talking about. A poor widow walks up to the treasury and puts in two small copper coins, worth practically nothing, and Jesus is the only one who notices her.

She's invisible to all the wealthy folks stuffing wads of cash into the big clay jars that hold the offerings. She's invisible to the crowds, who apparently have already forgotten what Jesus was just telling them a minute ago. She's even invisible to the disciples, who seem to have wandered off. Jesus has to call them over and say, "Hey, look over there. Do you see what I see? Do you see that poor woman, who just put in everything she had, all she had to live on? Do you see how desperate she is? Do you understand the situation she's in."

It's no surprise Jesus sees the widow and then makes her visible to people who otherwise would have looked right past her. Sprinkled all through the scriptures are passages where God either commands God's people to care for widows or scolds them for failing to care for widows. Women who had lost their husbands held a special place in God's kingdom because the absence of a husband made them a lot more economically vulnerable. It didn't automatically mean they'd end up homeless, but it did make their lives a lot less secure.

So when Jesus was warning the crowds about scribes taking advantage of widows, that wasn't some kind of metaphor He was describing a social reality. The way the system worked back then, a woman on her own was a lot more likely to experience economic hardship than a woman who was married.

I'm bringing all this up because having a better understanding of the social context gives us a different way to look at the story. We usually see the widow as a model of sacrificial giving, and she's often held up as an example we should all follow. Which is fine, except that Jesus doesn't treat her that way. He doesn't praise the woman for her generosity. He doesn't tell the disciples they should give like she gives. He doesn't teach them about the virtues of tithing. He doesn't whip out a stewardship sermon.

He simply points the woman out and says she put more into the treasury than everyone else, all those rich people, which is true. She put in more *relative to her income*, which apparently isn't much, probably because once her husband died, she had no way of supporting herself, and she couldn't pay her bills, and no one showed her any mercy, and her family refused to take her back in, and she wound up destitute.

That was a common occurrence. There were a lot of people like her in Jesus' day—people who slipped through the cracks. And not only widows. They weren't the only ones who had a special place in God's kingdom. The scriptures are full of passages that mention other groups of vulnerable people, as well, like orphans and immigrants.

So this isn't a story about someone who's an exemplary giver. This is a story about someone who lives in a world where there's incredible wealth and incredible poverty; a world where some people can give away fortunes like it's nothing and other people can barely scrape together a penny to put in the offering plate. And the problem is, no one in that world wants to acknowledge the injustice, and no one wants to see the despair,

maybe because they've gotten used to it; maybe because they don't want to get involved; maybe because they know that could be them, and it makes them uncomfortable; or maybe because deep down they realize they're complicit—they're part of the system that creates all that inequality.

But Jesus refuses to turn a blind eye, and he refuses to let his followers turn a blind eye, including his followers today. Because the fact is, things haven't changed all that much in the past two-thousand years. We still have inequality, we still have people in our cities and towns who are invisible, and Jesus is still pointing them out.

"Hey, look over there," he says to all of us this morning. "Do you see what I see?" Which is a simple enough question, but seeing what Jesus sees is never a simple matter because once we see, we can't un-see. We can't un-see the reality that our lives are connected to the lives of everyone around us, and we are complicit. We can't un-see the reality that our choices and lifestyles impact communities and economies around the globe. We can't un-see the reality that a lot of the things we have, and a lot of the privileges we enjoy, come at a cost that somebody else has paid.

That's a lot of weight Jesus puts on our shoulders. We can't see all those realities without feeling a sense of personal responsibility, even though the things we're talking about are way beyond our ability as individuals to control. There's not much any single one of us can do to change the system we're part of.

But think back to the story. When Jesus calls the disciples over to point out the widow, he calls all of them over together, as a group, and I think that's important. I think Jesus gives us this responsibility, not as individuals, but collectively, as the church. And together we can live up to that responsibility by doing what Jesus did—by saying to the world around us, "Hey, look over there. Do you see what we see? Do you see that Afghan family, who need a home? Do you see that person struggling with addiction? Do you see those workers, who don't have healthcare?"

This is the mission Jesus gives us—to refuse to turn a blind eye, and to refuse to let others turn a blind eye; to make the invisible visible, all those who have a special place in God's kingdom. Amen.