

November 11, 2018
“Big Questions: Widow Me This”
1 Kings 17:8-16; Mark 12:35-44

This morning we are continuing in our teaching series: Big Questions. And in this series we are focused in on Mark’s gospel from the lectionary passages, and in that we have been looking at some Big questions being asked or implied from these passages.

Questions about Jesus and who he is; Questions about the cost of following Jesus, Questions about marriage and divorce; Questions about the Resurrection, and so on.

In our passage that we read this morning we come across the classic bible story of the poor widow. And if you have been in and around a church for a while, this story should be pretty familiar. Right?

This poor, nameless widow comes to the temple and gives all that she had- just two small copper coins- to the temple treasury. This story is flannel graph gold, right? Remember flannel graphs. The felt board with all the characters to help tell the story.

Growing up in the church and I have heard this story countless times and it usually gets tied in to a sermon on giving and stewardship. Which are great things, and worshipful things that we are called to as followers of Jesus.

And the great thing is we didn’t plan it out this way, as we are just following the lectionary, but stewardship Sunday is coming up and so it seems the timing of this passage works out great. The story of the poor widow and her faithful, sacrificial giving.

So it may seem that the big question for all of us is to ask ourselves this morning is: W.W.W.D?... What would widow do? And then fill out those pledge cards. The sermon pretty much preaches itself.

But here is the thing... Up until a few weeks ago as I started diving into this passage and studying it I thought I had it all figured out. But as I got deeper into it, I have been challenged and my thinking has been stretched a bit and while I do think there is a message and picture here of sacrificial giving that no gift whether it be our money, time, skills, talent is too insignificant to give, if it is given to God.

That is not the only message I want to focus on this morning.

As we read and hear the story of the poor widow in the larger context of the whole passage and even Mark’s gospel I believe that God is drawing us into something deeper and more compelling than just a story about a widow and her sacrificial giving with just a simple application of “go and do likewise.” For one thing Jesus doesn’t actually say this.

So let's wrestle through this a bit together and trust that God will speak through His word...

Pray.

As we have seen, and as this series is appropriately named, there are a lot of big questions in Mark's gospel. In the several chapters before today's passage there are a lot of questions being asked of Jesus.

The Pharisees, Sadducees, the Scribes or teachers of the law... All the religious leaders have been asking Jesus big questions in their hope to trap him or trip him up in his answers. Get him in trouble. They have no intention of actually following or obeying Jesus but rather he would just go away.

We find though, with every question asked, and then answered by Jesus, the religious rulers and leaders are being more and more exposed for their hypocrisy, pride, and corruption of the religious system that was taking place in the temple.

And the conclusion of last week's passage is great. The questioning is done and the religious leaders have been reduced to silence.

It says: "and from then on no one dared ask him any more questions." (12:34)

Jesus drops the mic, or as my girls like to say complete with hand motions... "You got busted!"

The religious leaders have nothing more to say. And now they're angry and plotting and scheming even more to get rid of Jesus.

But for now the tables have turned and Jesus asks a question. The question of the day.

This here is essentially Jesus' last public sermon that Mark records for us. It is the end of his public ministry before he makes His journey to the cross. So with one last sermon to give, this is gonna be good.

But of all the different things Jesus could've have taught on, he picks what seems like an obscure Psalm of David. Psalm 110. And here he presents a riddle of sorts.

See I love riddles, especially ones that make me think or are creative or just fun.

Here are a few:

I am an odd number. Take away a letter and I become even. What number am I? Seven

What goes up and never comes back down? Your age

What question can you never answer yes to? Are you asleep yet?

Jesus is like:

Riddle me this? Why do the teachers of the law say the Messiah is the son of David?

Up until this moment it was known and taught that the messiah would be a descendent of David.

Which is true, so where are you going with this Jesus?

Well, he pries a bit deeper and asks: Why is it that the Psalm says:

“The Lord said to my Lord?” Why would David call his son, “Lord?”

So If you are confused, that’s ok. I’ll break it down a bit for us.

The first “Lord” refers to God and the second “Lord” to the Messiah... So it really reads- “God said to my messiah: sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.”

What Jesus is getting at here is that the scribes have missed something in their interpretation of scripture as it pertains to who the messiah would be.

The Messiah as portrayed here is obviously superior to David and not merely a descendant as was originally just believed. That is what Jesus is saying.

Why would any father call their son Lord? That doesn’t make sense. David’s words in this Psalm make no sense if the Messiah is just another human being. Jesus is not merely just a chip off the old block!

He is not merely the extension or descendant of David; He’s something more, something greater. The Messiah is the Son of David and the Son of God.

As N.T Wright puts it:

Jesus is raising the corner of the curtain that hides the biggest secret of all. Not only is he the Messiah coming with royal authority to Jerusalem and the Temple. Not only is he going to die to bring about the true kingdom. He is doing all of this not simply as David’s son but as David’s Lord.

By demonstrating the scribes faulty or missed interpretation, Jesus pretty much destroys their authority and has beaten them at their own game. They have failed in their main job of knowing and interpreting the scriptures. And what makes Jesus even more upset is they have abused their position and have used it to their own advantage.

Jesus is really about to get after them.

The crowd around though is loving it. “They listened to him with delight”.

And now Jesus moves on to addressing and calling out the false religion and corrupt religious system of the scribes.

Beware... watch out for the teachers of the law.

They 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.(Mark 12:38-40)

This same passage is also in Matthew's gospel but goes into a lot longer and more extensive list of the injustice and corruption amongst the Scribes and their practices of "false religion."

They come across as full of piety but in reality are full of pride and abuse their position and bring corruption all to pad their pockets. They focus on appearance and what they can get rather than what they can give.

What a contrast to the way and life of Jesus the messiah The way of God's kingdom.

Jesus has made it clear : "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." He taught, "For the Son of Man also came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45).

Philippians 2, really shows a contrasting picture.

Jesus Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!

Watch out... Beware... Don't be like the Scribes

"They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers."

Obviously the scribes weren't literally eating the houses but they were taking advantage of them and of their resources. Which is horrible, because in reality they should have been caring for them, watching out for them.

What the scribes have put forth is a false and corrupt religion using it as a means and justification for what they are doing. Taking advantage of the weak and vulnerable.

Jesus is not happy with them. "They will receive the greater condemnation," he says.

And this is the context that we now come to the story of the poor widow.

Personally I would feel better about this passage if we just see Jesus breaking down the false religious system and calling out the scribes and then raising up this great example of the poor widow for us to be like and to go and do likewise.... but as I said before I believe God is invited us to something deeper.

Jesus opens our eyes and invites us to see the widow. To see what she is doing. To not overlook her and get wrapped up in noticing all the other people and all that they are giving.

It would be so easy to not notice her, to overlook her as she quietly drops her two coins into the treasury. The way the temple treasury was set up was all of these various chests or places to put your coins in. And it was a big spectacle as you could see and hear and notice all those putting in a great amount of coins.

What comes to mind is one of those coin star machines. Do know what I'm talking about? You are in the store and you hear the clang, clang, clang, clang.

You can't help but hear and notice. At the temple treasury it would be loud and obvious how much each person was given.

Here at the Temple, Jesus notices her. And Jesus invites his disciples to come and notice her. Jesus invites us to notice her. To make it clear that even in her two small coins she has given way more than all the others. For she has given all.

Her gift reminds me of the story of the widow we read about earlier this morning.

The heart of the matter that Jesus is getting at is not at all about the show or spectacle and the amount given but really he is identifying the amount left. She has nothing. She gave all that she had, her life.

And this is one of those moments where I wish I could hear Jesus' tone in talking about the widow. Because tone makes a huge difference in how something is said and heard.

I have been caught in some unnecessary arguments or hurt feeling because of an email or text in which I misread the tone.

When a tone is not heard it can be difficult to understand what is actually being said.

Here is what I mean:
(Read with excitement)

"Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

(Read with sadness):

“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

Is Jesus praising her or is he lamenting for her? We don't get the follow up here with clarity or instruction. He never says “be like her” which would be nice, he just says don't be like the scribes.

So I think it is a bit of both praise and sadness. While Jesus might be saddened by the corrupt religious system and the prospect of religious leaders misusing this woman's offering, I have to believe he sees the heart of it all and he admires her faith in God and her sacrificial gift.

And the truth, the good news and gospel we see in the story of the widow that is also for us is that Jesus noticed her. That is what Jesus does. All throughout the gospels we see Jesus notices those who are often unnoticed, overlooked, oppressed, outcast.

In the temple, at the treasury where so many are noticed by what they are wearing, what they are doing, their power, their prestige, Jesus noticed and sees the widow. The one who has no prestige, no power, no money... no standing in that society. Jesus noticed her.

Jesus does that. He notices you. Jesus, the messiah came and gave his life for the vulnerable, the corrupt, the condemned... For us, for all of humanity.

A few weeks ago Tom brought up three important truths. Truths, I believe, we need to be reminded of again and again as it hopefully sinks into our hearts. Again I see these three truths within the Christian life and in this story.

We are desperately lost, deeply loved, and saved by grace.

So believe that God sees you, God notices you. We are desperately lost and so deeply loved that Jesus would give all to save us. To save us from our sins by His grace.

As we respond to that. That we are seen and loved , we are also called to see and notice others. This is another side to a message on stewardship here. Do we, as followers of Jesus steward the vulnerable, those in need, the oppressed, the unseen?

Do we as followers of Jesus notice those who are cast out, marginalized, face injustice, poor and vulnerable?

Jesus invites us into something more than just giving. He is drawing us deeper to come and see. To notice. To love. To love Jesus our savior and to love our neighbor as He has loved us.

I find helpful how NT Wright ties the whole passage together, from the riddle to the widow.

“Her sacrifice, though small, was total. Once again, when we read this story in light of Jesus’ riddle about David’s Lord and David’s son we discover a strange affinity. One might have thought she was ‘merely’ putting in two copper coins, but in fact she was putting in everything she had. One might have thought the Messiah was ‘merely’ David’s son- a human king among other human kinds. But in fact, in the Messiah, God has given himself totally, given all that he had and was.”

I really wished we knew more about the widow, what happened to her but we don’t. And while there is truth and a message here, about giving and giving to God and stewardship. I think more importantly we are left with a clear picture and model of discipleship as seen in the poor widow.

It’s a powerful picture that concludes Jesus public ministry that began back in Mark 1 with his initial call to come and follow me. To leave what you have and come follow me.

Jesus doesn’t ask us to do anything that he hasn’t already done for us. He sees us, he gave all for us and he invites us to be his disciple. To follow him, the one who came to serve and give his life. To see true religion as he established by his teaching, life and death and resurrection.

The widow we see gives all that she had, her whole life and is picture and model for those who follow Jesus. The one who gave his life for our life.

Discipleship involves absolute surrender and trust in the will of God to whose will and amazing purpose Jesus is about to commit himself fully as He goes to the cross.

We are desperately lost, but God sees us, notices us and finds us.

We are deeply loved that Jesus would give everything for us.

And we are saved by His amazing grace.