

Gleaning In The Fields Of Light

“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 of those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed from their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.’”

—The Gospel of Mark

A Different View Of The Widow’s Mite

By Ken Woodley

These are not the words that I was planning to write. I was going to write about the Widow’s Mite, noting her total generosity of spirit. I was going to call this meditation “The Widow’s Might,” noting that any act of generosity comes first from the mind and from the heart, and how mighty must have been her spirit of generosity to give every bit of money she had.

And then I did some research on the mite, itself, wanting to learn a little more about this coin of such small monetary value. It was while researching that on line that I stumbled on a commentary that pointed me in a completely different direction. I will never think of this heretofore beloved parable the same way, ever again.

What I found on line was the observation that Jesus never holds the widow up as an example to be followed. He never says that she did the right thing. He simply states the fact that the rich people made a big show over their generosity and gave some of their abundant wealth away, while the poor widow gave everything she had to live on.

That got me thinking about what else Jesus does and, just as crucially, what Jesus doesn’t do in this story. First, Jesus is intentionally sitting in the temple opposite the treasury, specifically watching all of the people make their financial contributions. That’s all he’s doing. An odd thing to do, it seemed to me.

What he doesn’t do is this: He never makes a financial contribution, himself. He sits there watching, and gives nothing, even after seeing the poor widow give everything she has. Nor does Jesus urge his disciples to make a contribution to the temple’s treasury.

Furthermore, even though he knows the poor widow has given everything she has to live on, Jesus does not give her anything at all, nor does he suggest that one of the disciples give her a coin or two so that she has something to live on.

He just sits there watching.

And I think he keeps getting madder and madder. I believe it fuels his desire to cleanse the temple of such oppressive money-making, profit-centric, get-rich scheming by the temple authorities.

In the passage from Mark, not quoted above, Jesus has already warned his listeners to beware of the scribes. “They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearances say long prayers,” he tells them.

So, perhaps the widow isn’t giving from a spirit of generosity at all, but from a sense of guilt that is weighed down upon her by such religious authorities as the scribes. Perhaps after giving the temple treasury her last mite she will lose her house to them and they can sell it for a profit. The poor widow would probably pass any kindly donation to herself straight on the temple treasury. Perhaps that’s why neither Jesus nor his disciples give her anything.

I think it’s important what Jesus does next. I believe that it gives us an insight into his thinking as he watches the financial transactions in the temple. As he is leaving, without making a contribution, someone marvels over the magnificence of the temple. “What massive stones,” they say.

Jesus is not impressed. None of them will be left standing, he flatly replies.

Systems of domination and oppression will not last forever. They have nothing to do with the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of Heaven may be near, but it is far away from the temple treasury.

Distant, still, from those who walk and rule the earth today with a temple treasury in their heart.