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Sermon 28 June 2020
Big Faith: The Widow

- Mark 12: 41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 43 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. 44 For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty (*husterésis*) has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

- Luke 21: 1 He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; 2 he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. 3 He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; 4 for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty (*husteréma*) has put in all she had to live on.”

- Intro
 - Good morning church!
 - We are going to take a break today from our Psalm Beach series for our monthly BIG FAITH Sunday--Today is the ELEVENTH of our Big Faith Sundays—that means we have one more to go—it’s hard to

believe that we have been doing BIG FAITH for almost a whole year, but here we are, 11 months in

- And as you know by now, on our Big Faith Sundays we have a Big Faith sermon in the morning, and then we come back together for our Big Faith Bible study in the evening. Tonight our Bible study will be meeting via Zoom at 6pm, and we certainly hope that you can join us for that—it's always a good time of discussion and fellowship and a time to deepen our own Big Faith.
- You'll also probably know that on our Big Faith Sundays we focus on one specific person from the scriptures who exemplifies "Big Faith," an individual in the Bible who, as the description on our website says, exemplifies extraordinary belief and a willingness to be used by God in amazing ways.
- And today our Big Faith subject is the widow who is mentioned in the gospels of Mark and Luke, who gives as her offering to the temple two copper coins, and whose story pretty much anyone who's grown up in the church knows well, because they've heard about her in many sermons and Sunday school lessons—I know I have—about how she teaches us to be a cheerful giver, and to contribute generously to the work of the church—maybe you've heard her mentioned in the sermon at the beginning of a season of fundraising, maybe for a new building or a new project, and she's used as an illustration of how

even those of us who don't have much ought to give as much as we can

- And maybe you're wondering why she's worthy of a Big Faith Sunday alongside some of the other individuals we've examined—folks like Peter, and Paul, and Mary—no, not THAT Peter, Paul and Mary, the Biblical ones—and folks like Joseph and Lot and Job and Timothy—the big names—and even Lydia—folks with names—folks who really do substantial things—this widow that Luke and Mark talk about, she doesn't even have a name, and the entirety of her actions in the whole Bible only amounts to her putting her two cents into the offering. That's all she does.
- But I want to suggest that like another nameless individual who had his own Big Faith Sunday back in March, the Man Born Blind, this widow's faith is bigger than it might seem at first glance, and her story, even though it warrants only a few words in a few verses in only two gospels, is worthy of our attention.
- We find the widow's story in two of the synoptic gospels. You'll remember that the synoptic gospels are Mathew, Mark and Luke, because they tell the story of Jesus' ministry in similar ways, with much of the same content. And so if we look at Mark and Luke's accounts of what happens at the temple in Jerusalem when Jesus sees this widow, we see that they are almost exactly the same.

- But what we also see if we back up a little bit and look at the bigger context in which the widow's story appears, we also see that the CONTEXT is almost exactly the same in these two gospels.
- And I think the context in which the widow's story happens is important for us to think about.
- Now we find the widow mentioned in chapter 12 of Mark's gospel, but it takes Luke 21 chapters to get there—that's not surprising when you consider that Mark starts his gospel with John the Baptist all grown up and being a prophet at the river when Jesus shows up, while Luke starts his gospel way back before either John the Baptist or Jesus were born, and tells us about their mothers' pregnancies and so on
- But anyway, when we get to chapter 11 in Mark's gospel and Chapter 19 in Luke's, we find that the gospel writers are recounting pretty much the same events, starting with the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem—the occasion that we celebrate on Palm Sunday—in Luke, Jesus predicts the destruction of Jerusalem, and in Mark he curses that fig tree, and also further on in Mark Jesus mentions the greatest commandment, while Jesus does that back in chapter 10 of Luke's gospel, but apart from those details, the story is almost identical.
- **And what we find in that story is that Jesus doesn't show up to Jerusalem, and to the Temple, to tell them what a great job they're doing, he shows up and sees what's going on and lets folks know how things REALLY are, which is not good, even though**

things, especially at the Temple, might SEEM to be working just fine.

- And we see this happening almost immediately when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, when he clears the temple of the money changers, those folks who were selling doves and who changed Greek and Roman money that people used outside of the temple into Jewish money that they could give in offering INSIDE the temple-- that's called sometimes the cleansing of the temple—and as he's doing that Jesus says “my house shall be a house of prayer but you've made it a den of robbers”—**that is, he's looking at what's going on and realising that what's meant for heavenly purposes is being used for earthly ones—and he turns the tables, literally, on that situation**
- And so Jesus teaches in the temple, but the chief priests and elders want to get rid of him— the gospels say clearly that they want to kill him, but the crowds hang on Jesus every word
- And so the leaders question Jesus' authority—they want to know what gives him the right to critique the way they do things, coming into the temple and looking around and giving his critique, his interpretation of what's going on there--but Jesus doesn't answer,
- Jesus just speaks in parables—he tells the rather difficult parable of the tenants, and then the leaders of the temple try to trap Jesus with THEIR words—they ask him whether they ought to pay taxes—that's

when Jesus asks whose likeness is on their coins and says “Render unto Caesar,”

- and then the Sadducees, who don’t even believe in the resurrection, ask Jesus about who a widow who had had seven husbands would be married to in the resurrection—to which Jesus responds—God is the God not of the dead but of the Living
- It’s at this point that Mark tells us that Jesus explains **what the greatest commandment is—Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbour as yourself,** and continues teaching about whose son the Messiah is—and all the while the crowds are delighted—and then in v38 of Mark’s 12th chapter and verse 45 of Luke’s 20th chapter, this happens --- this is Luke’s version, but it’s almost identical to Mark’s,:
- 45 In the hearing of all the people Jesus said to the disciples, 46 “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. 47 They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. **They will receive the greater condemnation.**”
- These scribes SEEM righteous and worthy and upstanding, but the truth is, and **Jesus sees it**, that they will RECEIVE the GREATER condemnation.

- **It's immediately after this that both Mark and Luke tell us about the widow's offering,**
- And then as Jesus is leaving the temple, people are talking about how glorious and ornate it is, made with magnificent stones and containing great gifts, and Jesus says: Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."
- And so it's in the context of Jesus' presence in the Temple, when he's looking at what's going on there and speaking prophetically—saying what you're doing here is wrong, and condemnation and punishment is coming, despite the way things may SEEM—despite the fact that you may have lots of money coming in, and a beautiful building, and a friendly, mutually profitable relationship with the local authorities, and it may look like you're in charge of things, like you're in control—despite these appearances, you're on a path to destruction—it's in this context that we find the story of the widow's offering.
- Let's remind ourselves what happens, I'm reading from Mark's gospel:
- Mark 12: 41 Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 43 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. 44 For all of them have

contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty (husterésis) has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

- Now I want to look briefly this morning at this widow, and you will notice that Mark tells us in verses 41 and 42 what is happening—things as they appear to be, things as they would seem to be—just the facts—all that meets the eye. Jesus sees rich people putting large sums into the treasury, and the widow putting her offering in
- But then in verses 43 and 44, Jesus offers his interpretation of what’s happening, beyond the way things seem—Jesus tells his disciples the way things really are, when we understand that there is more than meets the eye.
- **And so this morning I want to look at this widow, and I want to first examine things as they are, or at least as they appear to be, and I want to suggest three characteristics of this widow, three ways of describing her, three observations we might make about her,**
- **But I want to also consider the way Jesus sees her, and examine the way that Jesus’ presence changes things, the way that seeing through the eyes of Jesus reveals that things are not always what they seem.**
- And so without any further introduction, the first observation I want to make about this widow is this
- She is defined by her loss. Her identity is linked to her loss.

- Now there are a lot of ways that Mark and Luke could have described this woman. They could have described her simply on the basis of her gender and said “a poor woman came and put in two very small copper coins,”
- They could have added more detail about her age, a young woman, an old woman, a middle-aged woman—
- They could have told us where she comes from, a native of Judea, or a woman from Samaria or Nazareth
- They could have told us what she does—a weaver of cloth or a shepherdess or a tent-maker
- Or whether she has children, a mother, or in terms of her family relationships, the daughter of James the son of Zebedee, the sister of Sara,
- Or as Paul does in Philippians 4, Luke and Mark could have just given us her name, Euodia or Synteche, because surely she had one, but her name would not have told us about this woman’s place in Jerusalem, about her place in the temple—
- Who is she? She is a widow. She has lost her husband. This is the most important thing to know about this woman. She is a widow.
- The Greek word is chera, and it ONLY means widow—it is used all over the New Testament, and only ever means one thing—a widow, a woman who has lost her husband—and the word chera is related to

the word “chasm”—a wide empty space, a vacant abyss—this woman is one whose identity is connected to what she has lost

- And so when Mark tells us how little her two coins are worth, he reminds us that the culture in which this woman lives assigns worth not only to her offering, but also to her—and she is a net deficit, when her society looks at her they see not a positive but a negative—a loss. She is a chera, a chasm—
- and not only is she a widow, she is a poor widow
- And yet, when Jesus comes to the temple—and yet, when Jesus looks at this woman, he sees.
- He sees that even though she is identified by her culture as one to whom loss is irrevocably connected, yet she gives. And not only does she give, but she gives more—more than anyone else—more than all the rich folks who throw in large amounts for every one to see—
- She is defined by her loss, and yet she gives, not out of her wealth, but out of her poverty, out of her lack—the Greek root word is hystereo—meaning to lack or to fall behind—it’s a word that is related the English words hysteria, and hysterical and hysterectomy. These words don’t just refer to lack or poverty, they are also related to the **womb, the uterus**—that empty space from which new life miraculously springs
- There is more going on here than meets the eye

- But let's move on to a second characteristic of this woman—as a widow, she is to be supported by the Temple.
 - You know, the Bible has a lot to say about widows—you can't read much of the Torah or the Writings or the Prophets or Psalms or Proverbs without reading about the responsibility of God's people to take care of the vulnerable, among whom the widows are always mentioned—
 - God watches out for the well-being of widows, and calls on his people to do the same, and when the people of God lose their way, the prophets often point to their mistreatment of widows as an example of how they're going wrong—in the early church in the book of Acts, care for widows is a primary task,— Paul gives clear instruction to Timothy about the treatment of widows, and the book of James tells us in the first chapter: Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress
 - So when we are told by Mark and Luke that this woman is a widow, it is understood that she is one who is to be supported by the Temple, she is to be supported by the people who call themselves the people of God—
 - And yet, when Jesus looks upon her offering he declares that she has put more into the treasury than all the others—now think about that for a minute—she has put MORE INTO the treasury than all the others—she has given more than all these rich folks who support the

Temple with their offerings—whose support the church depends upon—Jesus says this poor widow has given MORE—that is—who is the greatest supporter of the Temple? This poor widow. Why?

Because she has given MORE than these other supporters.

- This poor widow, who is supposed to be SUPPORTED BY the Temple, is the Temple's greatest supporter.
- How can this be?
- This can be if you understand that the Temple is not these precious gifts and magnificent stones that gleam in the sun, if you understand that the Temple is much more than meets the eye, if you understand that the temple is not a building, not a symbol of earthly authority—the temple is not what it seems, it is not this place, it is not simply this structure, this worldly edifice, and in fact through the eyes of Jesus, this place is a den of robbers, this place is a symbol of those who would devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.
- And that brings me to the final characteristic of the widow that I want to mention
- The widow is an example of the failure of this economy.
- If this woman has only two copper coins to live on, and if the Temple is charged with supporting her, while its magnificent stone walls are filled with precious gifts, while the rich throw large amounts into the treasury, then clearly it has failed in its responsibility to care for her.

- If those who are called to give alms—to give just a little from their riches—have been unable to provide for this widow, then this system has failed.
- Not only this, but if the leaders of the Temple have convinced this woman that she SHOULD give her last two cents, all that she has to live on, to the Temple so that she has none leftover, then the leaders of this economy are indeed devouring the houses of the widows, this widow in particular.
- And yet—Jesus sees that she gives. She gives ALL she has. Down to her last cent.
- How can she give all she has unless she knows that there's more where that came from? Unless she knows that there is one who truly supplies her every need according to his riches in glory, whose abundance is never-ending, who watches over her even when those who control the Temple do not—even when they would devour her house—yet she gives—not to those who control the earthly Temple but to the one who provides for her—
- This widow knows who truly supplies her need, and it aint the temple.
- Jesus sees that even though this widow is an example of the failure of this economy she is an example of a different way of thinking, she testifies to a system of abundance exemplified by the early church in the book of Acts, an economy in which nothing is held back, in which every need is met, a system of abundance that Jesus speaks of when

he tells us do not worry about what you'll eat or drink or what you'll wear because your Heavenly Father provides for you

- PAUSE

- This unnamed widow is defined by loss, yet Jesus sees that she gives more than anyone else. She is to be supported by the Temple, yet Jesus sees that she is the Temple's greatest supporter. She is an example of the failure of this economy, yet Jesus sees that she is an example of an economy that is yet to come.
- This widow that Mark and Luke speak of, this widow that Jesus observes, this widow that Jesus says gives more than anyone despite appearances to the contrary, she is not just a widow who teaches us about cheerful giving—
- She is a living example of the greatest commandment—she loves God with all her heart, soul, mind and strength, and her neighbour as herself, even when her neighbours abuse her.
- This unnamed widow gives everything, empties herself out, even when her house is being devoured by the scribes, and so she has the same mind as Jesus, who emptied himself out, even to death on a cross, and who was given a name above every other name
- And so this morning the story of this unnamed widow reminds us to see the way that Jesus sees, to think the way that Jesus thinks, and to offer all that we have and all that we are to the Kingdom, no matter how little value the world may place on us or what we have to offer, even if the world looks at us and says “that’s not worth much,” “that’s nothing”—we can say “it’s not much, but

it's all I have—all I am"—we can say, I surrender all--Put your all on the altar today, because Jesus sees things differently, Jesus sees the Big Faith in a little offering.

- May God bless you today
- Join us this evening at 6pm on Zoom and we'll continue to unpack these scriptures to see what God has to say to us today—I hope to see you then.