

Reimagine Ourselves... Honestly?!
Sermon 200 | Greystone Baptist Church | October 15, 2023
Mark 12:38-44

I recently had a conversation with a friend who is 93 years old. We talked about life and kids, challenges we face as parents and grandparents, and the state of the world. I'm not sure exactly how we got to the topic but at one point they began to share memories from their schools growing up. How different things used to be from the curriculum used to the social realities facing our children today.

At one point, my friend mentioned that when they were in school, everything was segregated. Two separate school buildings, two water fountains, two separate sets of bathrooms - those for white people and those for people of color.

Surprised that this came up at all, I heard myself responding without thinking, "Wow..." (I said) "I can't even imagine what that must have been like... what was that like for you?" "Well," they said back, "I couldn't imagine anything different at the time. It was all we knew."

This is a reality that I've heard expressed many times as I've talked with people who lived during segregation. But this time the words danced through my mind as if on a reel, for the rest of the day. "I couldn't imagine anything different..." they said. I found myself thanking God that though so many people living in the time of segregation couldn't imagine anything different... God did, and God kept on trying. And that though God's creativity and love for this world, that once unimaginable new reality filled the imaginations of Civil Rights leaders and eventually - through hard work, long-suffering, and a whole lot of disciplined struggle - the segregated world that this 93 year old friend of mine grew up in, became something unimaginably new.

Today we read seven short verses from Mark's Gospel. Verses that tell the short but memorable story we call "The Widow's Mite". Over time, this ancient episode has become a classic example of sacrificial giving as the widow offers her last two coins to the Temple treasury - a symbol of her giving her whole self to God. That would make for a great stewardship sermon, wouldn't it? And we are in the middle of a series called, *Our Money Story*. So a wiser preacher might just take things in that direction. But I do not like predictable sermons and that piece about imagination was nagging at me all week and so I wonder if today, we might re-imagine this well-known story?

Long before the widow darkens the door of the Temple, Jesus is already there. He has been teaching and talking with the scribes, in fact many scholars say that this whole scene is about that interaction between Jesus and the scribes. Think about it: Jesus is in the Temple, which is the home-base of scribal religion. It is the physical location of the faith and religious practice of the people. It was supposed to be the house of God. Therefore we might expect that when Jesus - who is the Son of God - was in the Temple, he should feel comfortable, relaxed, at home. But that is not at all what happens here.

Jesus doesn't seem comfortable, but rather a bit confrontational as he names the scribes' multiple abuses of office - the most egregious being their abuse and exploitation of the widows. Offering a four-fold critique of the scribal office Jesus warns those gathered in the Temple that the scribes love:

To walk about in long robes

Greetings in the marketplace

The first bench in the synagogues

The seat of honor at the dinner table¹

Each layer of this critique supported the case Jesus was making, that the scribes - at every stage - were more concerned with their elevated social status and the special privileges their office provided than they were with tending to the people in their care.

This of course, posed a stark contrast to the Gospel Jesus preached and modeled when he said "the last will be first and the first will be last," and that if one wanted to be a disciple, they had to become a "servant of all." Jesus could have stopped there, but his harsh rebuke continues as he credits the affluence of the Temple with the exploitative actions of the scribes. Their public displays of righteousness have in many cases earned them positions of power, it was common for them to be named as trustee over a widow's property (as if she couldn't manage her late husband's estate). In these situations, the scribes were widely known to take excessive compensation for their adjudication of the assets, leaving the widows powerless and without provision.

Shame on you! Jesus says as he confronts the scribes in their own house, the temple... the crowds gathering, listening intently. The point might have been made but Jesus isn't finished yet. After making his critique and stating his word of caution, Jesus takes a seat across from the treasury, the place where offerings were made as people entered the Temple to worship or to pray.

Can't you just see him grabbing a chair and looking straight into the eyes of the priest holding the offering plate as the wealthy enter and give a portion of their riches. Then before Jesus breaks his stare, the widow walks in and puts her offering in the plate too, two coins totaling a minor sum, but still being all that she had. His gaze doesn't shift from the treasury, nor does he say another word before getting up and leaving the Temple with his disciples. In fact the next words Jesus will offer are words of condemnation for the scribes, the treasury, the Temple... the whole religious system which Jesus sees as corrupt.

This was supposed to be a place of refuge for the widows - the law was clear about their protected place in the community. The religious system, the temple, the community was supposed to be a safety net, a safe sanctuary, and yet it had become the very place of their exploitation. *Shame on you!* Jesus implies with his abrupt departure after observing the treasury.

¹ Ched Myers. *Binding the Strong Man*

It can be so tempting to tell this story and remember the widow's offering as an act of sacrificial giving. When we tell it this way we like to place ourselves in her shoes and ask ourselves if we give as sacrificially as she does - holding her up as the prime example of goodness and faithfulness. But before we carry on down that path, we need to wrestle with the fact that after the woman puts her two coins in the treasury, Jesus does not offer her exclusive praise, Jesus does not say (as he does in other circumstances): "go and do likewise."

Instead, Jesus sees the widow's offering as further evidence of corruption and exploitation. The system that was supposed to support her, protect her, provide for her, was taking her very last coin. And when we allow the widow her place in the larger unfolding narrative - her gift and her story - begin to function more like a parable than a stewardship model. Her gift and her story do not offer us an example to emulate - Instead, they cause us to wrestle with a series of uncomfortable questions about our own treasuries, our own systems, and our own institutions, yes, even our own churches:

Who are they serving? For whom are they providing? The rich and powerful... Those who already have a place in society - OR - Are we serving, providing for, caring for those who are most vulnerable?

These are difficult questions; they make us uncomfortable because we know that God has commanded us to provide for the poor, the outcast, the foreigner, the stranger, the orphan, the widow, the *lowest of low* and *the least among us*... We know that we are called to live in God's economy, which is an economy of abundance where *there is always enough*, and yet as we gaze upon our own wallets, bank accounts, and paystubs, it feels like there is never enough.

Never enough to feel secure ourselves - much less to give to ensure the security of others. Never enough to begin dismantling the broken systems because we recognize that our own resources and therefore our own futures are tied up within them. Never enough to risk a different way of making, saving, spending, and investing our money because all we can see is the way things are, and seem to have always been.

"Never enough," we stubbornly say as the questions posed by the widow's very presence come at us faster than we can handle. But then again, maybe we *are* lacking a bit, in the resource department. Just not in the ways that we might think. Not lacking in our financial or material resources, but lacking rather in imagination. Like my 93 year old friend who confessed that they couldn't imagine any way other than segregation, maybe we all suffer from a chronic lack of imagination.

Maybe there is another way to live, to invest, to support one another *and* our most vulnerable neighbors, maybe we just can't see it yet - because are stuck in our old patterns and stuck to our old institutions... but maybe we need to re-imagine.

That sounds nice, pastor, (you may be thinking) but how exactly shall we do that? The truth is - I do not know because I suffer from the same human condition and lack of divine

imagination that plagues us all. But if we are learning anything during this time of examining *our money story* and the ways that our finances and our faith go hand in hand, it seems that a re-imagined life might begin with recognizing that we are called to live in the Kingdom of God which Jesus proclaimed is *here and yet to come*. And in that kingdom we have to remember that: God's economy is different from the economies of this world. In God's economy there is always enough - we just have to share. In God's economy we do not store up and hoard resources for ourselves, rather we understand that all we have is God's and it is our responsibility to become generous and faithful stewards. We also remember that In God's economy, there has to be time for rest. For those with comfortable jobs offering paid time off and 2-day weekends *and* for those working multiple jobs and still struggling to get by.

In God's economy we are all responsible to and for one another. And so it is going to take a LOT of holy imagination to help us straighten some things out. As far as we may have come - we still have the proverbial widows among us - those whose labor is exploited and whose lives are taken advantage of.

Our systems are still broken, and it is all of our responsibility not to sensationalize the widow who gave all that she had... but to stay and hear the critique, to see the brokenness, and not to look away, but to stare it directly in the face and begin to imagine a new reality.