

Highfield Rd Uniting Church

Generous Community

Mark 12:38 - 44



The widow's mite. I've long thought that to be a grand pun, 'm.i.t.e' or 'm.i.g.h.t'? Her small gift is mighty generosity. Because that's the way that I have always understood this story. Jesus championing this woman for her selfless love of God - look, she has given, even in her poverty, all that she had to live on. In shining contrast to the scribes whom Jesus has just condemned for their love of honour and their corruption, this widow quietly steps up and donates

her last coins to the treasury of the temple for the glory and worship of God. But is that really the lesson that Mark and his community wanted to pass on to the next generation and beyond?

When Mark's Gospel was first being read, there was no Temple anymore and the early Christian communities were sharing their resources to support widows and orphans. Why would they need a story about widows being generous to support the Temple? What seems like, for us, an ideal story to support a Stewardship Program, might be the very opposite. Instead of a contrast to the scribe's corruption - stealing widow's homes - it's an example of that very corrupt system. Religious obligation that uses piety and duty to suck even the last few little coins out of a widow's hand. I know you will find many commentaries and opinions and even songs in praise of this widow's selfless generosity and devotion to God. But there are others, including Ched Myers *Binding the Strong Man*, which I have referred to before, which point out, "Look where Mark has put the story, between condemnation of the scribes and prediction of the Temple's destruction. This is not a nice story about a dutiful widow, this is an example and highlight of what is wrong in the system."

Jesus, after a series of confrontations with the scribes and priests, and a powerful condemnation of their practices and attitude as the shepherds of Israel, sits down opposite the treasury. Now, those who are familiar with the Temple would know that there were 13 treasury donation boxes around the court of the women, the first of the courts for Jews surrounding the sacred centre. How do you sit down opposite 13 dispersed donation boxes? I know I am stretching the Greek, but could it be that Mark wants the reader to infer that Jesus sat down in opposition to the donation boxes? Just as he turned over the tables in the court of the Gentiles to make the statement that the Temple should be an open place of prayer, here he sits protesting the donation boxes to make the statement that the Temple should be following the Law and helping widows and orphans, and not abusing their piety to extort money from them.

This story sits, along with the condemnation of the scribes, as a warning to the Early Church to discern and follow the difference between faith and religion, the difference between love and obligation, the difference between community and organisation. The faith that revered David dancing down the street in front of the Ark, that held an empty room as the holiest space, that knew love of God and love of neighbour where the prime commands, had become swamped by the religion of Temple and sacrifice, the revering of priests and scribes, and the crushing obligation of hundreds of rules controlling every aspect of life. And these stories sit in scripture as a warning - 'don't go down that path!' And we look at our grand cathedrals, preachers in private jets, Christian shops full of holy nick-nacks, and a culture of duty and obligation, and wonder, "Did we get the message?" There are regular cries on social media and other platforms of 'Tax the churches!' And I laugh. I don't know any churches making a profit worth taxing! And it ignores mission and outreach. And I know that the cry for taxing comes from an American context, where it is easy to set up a business in self-help or wellness, call it a religion and go tax free, but I must admit, it does reflect an outsiders view of the wealth on display in many of our churches. From the huge, beautifully decorated cathedrals of Europe to the Glass Cathedrals of California, our desire to honour a great and awesome God can look like hypocrisy in the face of our stated mission to the poor. Are we about religion, obligation, and organisation or are we about faith, love, and community?

A free will offering in gratitude to God, to enable the church to operate is one thing, but I would be mortified if I thought that someone felt so obligated, or pious that they put their last \$2 in the offering plate! God doesn't need your last \$2; you need the support of the community. A gift offered in love to help the church in its mission is one thing, but our call to servanthood should lead to someone giving their last \$2! We don't need your last \$2; we need to include you in our mission to those in need. That is what community is all about. Four weeks back we considered the story of Jesus and the enquiring man who went away sad because he was rich. When Peter said that the disciples had given up everything to follow, Jesus replied, "no one who has left house or siblings or parents or children for my sake will not receive a hundred-fold now". That is community. Not 'following Jesus demands that you give everything, even till it hurts', but 'following Jesus brings you into the community of loving disciples'. No demanding obligations, no expectation of lavish giving or gregarious service, but the flow of love and support that takes the gifts available and serves the needs apparent.

I accept the cathedrals and decorations and religious artifacts are an expression of devotion and an expression of the awesome nature of God. And I accept that church buildings are a support to worship and mission. The point of Jesus protest is that those expressions and resources should not come with an obligation on all members to impoverish themselves. The Gospel and the faith and the flow of love are the primary concerns - seek those first and the rest will come as required.