

Mites and Might: A Widow's Offering

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Luke 20: 45-47, Luke 21: 1-4

I want to begin with a confession. Now I realize that this may well be a reflection of my own intellectual limitations and incapacities, but I'll confess that I'm really rather ambivalent about the Bible. I don't pour over it with love and devotion, and tend to be somewhat suspicious of people who do. When I see a person reading the Bible on a plane or in a public area, I keep track of the time and how often they turn the pages just to test whether or not they are actually reading it or if it's all just a show. I find parts of the Bible to be horrendous and even despicable, and I don't have a lot of interest in many of the topics that seem to be so important for many of the Biblical writers — or readers, for that matter. When someone begins a sentence with the words, "well, the Bible says," and proceeds to cite chapter and verse, my brain tends to exit the scene and my eyes begin a slow upward roll into my head.

I sometimes wish that it wasn't this way, but after being repeatedly slugged by Bible lovers using selected texts from Leviticus and Romans as brass knuckles; my trust level is fairly low.

Yet it seems that just when I am ready to pack it in all together, I find myself captured by a particular story or poetic passage or theme that pulls me back into the Biblical world with all of its flaws and violence and confusion and beauty and angst. It is for this inability to completely let go that I am particularly appreciative of the work of Dale Martin, a Biblical scholar at Yale University.

Martin challenges the widespread notion of what he calls textual agency — that is, the myth that the Bible somehow “speaks” and that our job is to simply “listen” and hear what the text has to say to us.

Martin reminds us that texts must and are always interpreted by human beings. After all, even the simple act of reading is an interpretation. Martin writes, “Human beings are necessary for meaning to take place, and we can experience no interpretation without human agency. Therefore, the responsibility for interpretation — the responsibility for the meaning we ‘find’ — lies with us human readers of the text, not with the text itself understood apart from interpretation.”¹ Martin suggests that we read certain ways because we are “socialized to do so,” and change our readings as we interact with other human beings. Quite succinctly he says, “Texts don’t mean. People mean with texts.”²

At this point, some people start to get rather uneasy and begin to raise the specter of anarchy and brash unethical readings of Scripture. Their anxieties and fears are misleading. After all, we all come with various socialized constraints and influences. And certainly history has shown us that it is often those who are the most certain of their Biblical foundations who have supported violence and heinous beliefs and practices. Given your conference experiences, I rather suspect this is a point that does not require much elaboration.

So I invite you to “mean” with me as we turn to that familiar text about the widow’s offering.

We find Jesus teaching at the temple, and apparently there are all kinds of beautiful people there — especially rich men with great robes, who sit in the best

seats and make a big show of putting money into the treasury. I'm sure they had everyone's attention — after all, garnering lots of attention was the whole point of their exercise. But after watching a bit, Jesus turns his focus and the focus of his disciples towards a poor widow and watches as she puts her two small coins into the treasury — a paltry offering, but it was all that she had. Already, I like that Jesus sees the widow in the midst of all of these self important figures. My mother is a widow and I often stunned by how invisible she is in the legal, religious, political and social eyes of our society. So I am gladdened by Jesus' attention.

A word about widows in ancient times. Widows were a protected class under the Laws of Moses. In a patriarchal society like Israel, widows and their children were among the most vulnerable and dependent and hence were entitled to unique protection and special moral concern. Their well being was a gauge of the spiritual health of the nation, and prophets often warned of bitter consequences when the needs of widows and orphans went unattended.³ Jesus continues in this tradition as at the temple he condemns the scribes claiming they “devour widow's houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.” What he is exposing and critiquing is a culture of corruption and greed that was preying upon the weak for the benefit of a powerful few whose baseness was carefully hidden behind veneers of piety and respect. It is a violation, a scandal.

This should not be hard for us to understand. After all, it's about building sports stadiums instead of funding poor children's health care. Or enacting tax cuts that favor the wealthiest. Or bailing out Wall Street, but shrugging our

shoulders as the homes of widows and families are devoured by scheming lenders.

Jesus is harsh in his condemnation of the scribes because he understands that this is not simply a personal matter of corruption and greed. Rather, the behaviors represent a rupture in all of Israel's relationship and covenant with God. The story of the widow's offering suggests that the well being of the most vulnerable among us are not just issues of economics and charity, but profound issues of faith and covenant. There are holy consequences for the exploitation of the weak. God has an opinion.

Theologian Karl Barth makes this strikingly clear. In his *Church Dogmatics* he writes,

God always takes God's stand unconditionally and passionately on this side and this side alone: against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly, against those who already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied it and deprived of it.⁴

It suggests that if we want a right relationship with God, if we want to truly experience the heart of the sacred, if we want to do well as a people, as a church, as a community, then we need to move past the displays of might and power and rightness and turn our attention to the places that Jesus noticed — to the margins, with the excluded and the outcast.

Theologian Joerg Rieger pushes this yet a little further. For him, it's not just a matter of charity that calls us to what Rieger refers to as "places of great pressure" or the "reality that hurts." Rather, it's matters of survival, hope and

faithful possibility. For Rieger, it is at those places of great pressure where the dominate systems have failed people where we begin to catch glimpses of an alternative reality that just may save us all.⁵

So now I'm back to that widow in the temple. She lived within the context of the great Roman Empire whose love affair with money, power and control was all encompassing. With stealth, violence and sheer might the empire moved to consume the world, and its ways and values had even captured the loyalty of the temple leadership. If there was anyone who resided in a place of great pressure or a reality that hurt, it was probably this widow. She was poor, she was vulnerable, she was exploited, and she was a nobody in this structure of power and might and rightness.

And so she enters the temple without fanfare and quietly puts her two coins, all that she has, into the treasury. According to the rules and the values of the empire, her actions made absolutely no sense. She was foolish, irrational, insignificant.

Or was she? Jesus seems to suggest that it is this woman, this nobody, this widow, who is in actuality offering to anyone who dares to notice a glimpse of an alternative reality... the kin-dom of God, if you will, that stands in humble, courageous and creative defiance to the powers and principalities that love money and the prestige that it buys. It just may be that the widow's offering reflects her unwillingness to cede to the practices and rules of domination where one's gain always comes at another's expense, and one's value is determined by their perceived wealth.

So who knows, it may just be that this widow is a kind of holy guerrilla resister! I'm intrigued by the possibility. Most of all, I wonder what her witness might mean for us today as we stand in the shadows of the powers and principalities of our time as they are expressed in our politics, communications, economics and maybe even confessions of faith.

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May it be so with us.

¹ Dale Martin. *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006)

² Martin, p. 5.

³ Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, ed. *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992) 269-270.

⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, vol 2:1*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957) 386-387.

⁵ Joerg Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010) 27.