**A World Worth Saving**

A Meditation on Mark 12: 38 – 44 and 1 Kings 17: 8 – 16

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Two widows, and what do we know about them? Nameless and faceless, and far removed from our experience. They themselves separated by countless years. Defined by the deaths of their husbands – what a way to be known. The first one is in a bleak situation. She isn’t an elderly woman, who has had a long and happy life. No, she is young enough that she has a son, a son small enough that he can still be carried. We also learn that she has given up hope of keeping him alive in the face of a severe food shortage. It’s not a pretty picture.

The second widow? We know even less about her, although her situation is not much rosier. She appears to be a faithful Jewish woman, as she is bringing her last two pennies to place in the offering at the Temple. But maybe that is just a last-ditch effort in hopes that some good may return to her.

Both of these women, despite their circumstances, *choose* to give away the little they have. The widow of Zarephath gives to a complete stranger, that he might live. The widow in Mark’s story gives to the Temple, an act of faith and trust. I can’t even begin to imagine what these woman were feeling. The despair, especially for a mother over the fate of her child. Yet, somehow it was worth it to them to share from the little they had.

How do you decide if something is worth it? If something is worth having, or worth doing, or worth giving yourself to? What are your criteria?

When you hear about a “GoFundMe,” how do you decide whether or not to give? Is it an emotional connection? Someone has lost their home to a fire or flood or other natural disaster, and you know what that’s like. Or maybe someone you know is trying to raise the funds to cover funeral costs after a sudden and unexpected death, and you’ve been there. You understand. You respond out of compassion. But how do you decide? You can’t give to everything…

How do you decide about pursuing that career change?

How do you decide if a relationship is worth the vulnerability, worth the emotional investment?

Some are faced with decisions about whether or not a treatment or surgery will be worth the risks involved. With no guarantees about how much pain will be relieved, or how much time can be gained, is it worth it? `

Everyday choices. How do you decide? Do you weigh the pros and cons? Make lists? Talk with friends?

Some of us are more impulsive than others. Some of us jump in without testing the water. Some more deliberate. Sometimes we decide not to decide, and that, too, is a choice. Sometimes, the choice is no choice at all, simply an acceptance of what will be. Was that what happened to these women? Or for these women, was desperation their only motive?

Let’s begin with the widow of Zarephath. There was a drought in the land, leading to widespread famine. If you back track a little you will discover that the prophet Elijah is the cause of that drought, or at least, he’s God’s instrument. Between the evil deeds of King Ahab, and the worship of Baal, a drought was, according to the story, God’s way of getting everyone’s attention. God provided for Elijah, first sending ravens to bring him food twice a day while he was hiding from his enemies, then sending him to this widow for shelter. (A side note – ravens were on the list of “unclean animals,” but here are the source of life and rescue!)

He asks for water, precious and essential, and she gives it to him, a practice of hospitality that was deeply rooted within her. Yet even as she does so, might she wonder if she is depriving her child of the water he will need? Next, Elijah asks her to give him bread, and she responds,

“As surely as the Lord your God lives, I don’t have any food; only a handful of flour in a jar and a bit of oil in a bottle. ***Look at me.*** I’m collecting two sticks so that I can make some food for myself and my son. We’ll eat the last of the food and then die.”

She could not know that the man who is asking her for hospitality is the very prophet who claims to hold the promise of rain within his grasp. Nor could she know that he is hiding from his enemies, his life at risk. If he were to admit any of this, what would she have done? Spit in his face, and force him to look upon her child’s wasting body?

“As surely as your God lives,” she says to him. “*Your* God.” As if she knows who is to blame for their suffering. As if he should know that his God has caused this pain. Until this moment, has he been sheltered from the suffering of the innocent? But now he must face it. He has come to one who does not share his faith, does not know his God, to seek mercy. His work - in God’s name - has caused her pain. What a truly bizarre set of circumstances. And somehow – because she has nothing to lose? – she trusts Elijah’s promise that a miracle will save them. The story will become more tragic before it becomes hopeful, for her son will become deathly ill. She asks if it is due to her sin, and even Elijah questions God’s motives, God’s actions. “Don’t do this evil thing, God! Don’t kill her son!” Elijah demands God to restore life where there has already been so much suffering, and God does. The mother, amazed, responds, “You do speak for the Lord.”

One mercy has led to another, but it is a complicated story. Strangers – we could even go so far as to say enemies considering the circumstances – depending upon one another for life. And would the woman of Zarephath then consider that it had been worth the risk of trusting this prophet of Yahweh? Was it worth it?

Our other widow’s story is very different. She isn’t living in the midst of a famine. There is no reason that she isn’t being cared for by her faith community. Providing for widows and orphans has always been one of God’s most basic expectations. In contrast with those scribes (not *all* the scribes, but some) who flaunt their money, who seek recognition and honor, this woman brings a tiny, but genuine offering. Maybe she even received these coins as a gift of charity, but she doesn’t keep them. She offers them to the Temple treasury. And she had to know the system to which she was giving was flawed, imperfect, complicated.

Is she foolish? Naïve? Hopeful? *Hopeless?* (What’s the point of holding on to two pennies?) Perhaps her offering is a gift of integrity. Like the widow of Zarephath who had been taught the practice of hospitality, a practice she lived out to the extent of playing host to the instrument of her own suffering *and* her own relief, this widow is true to herself, true to her faith.

She gives herself, her whole self, as Jesus says. Her whole life.

She gives herself to something that will be *destroyed*, as Jesus explains in Mark’s next passage. As the disciples gape over the impressive Temple structure, Jesus predicts its destruction. It is a human institution after all and cannot survive purely for the sake of its own existence. The Temple was no less immune to corruption than our churches have been throughout history. There was good and bad. Jesus called out the ones who said long prayers just to hear their own voices, and those who profited off the suffering of women’s financial difficulties. The widow had to have known this truth, just as you know this about churches today. But she gave her life, her whole life, despite this reality. Despite or because? Could she have had faith in redemption?

So pause here and imagine Jesus as a widow woman.

Is that an image we can add to our ways of understanding him? Jesus, the very image of hospitality in the midst of suffering. Jesus, who will give his whole life for us, flawed and foolish as we are. Could this woman have been who Jesus was waiting for as he sat in the Temple, opposite the money box? Knowing that where our treasure is, there will our hearts be also, did he wait, hoping for an image that would give him strength as he prepared for the pain ahead?

He watched the wealthy give their money, and probably gave thanks for their gifts, but as a penniless man himself, he couldn’t identify with them. He could, however, find encouragement in a poor woman who gave everything because she believed in a world worth saving. A world worth saving, not because it was perfect, but because it was flawed. A world worth saving because it was the world of his imagining, born of his love. How do you decide if it is worth it?

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