

---

## *The Invisible Widow Who Gave Everything She Had*

[Listen to the podcast.](#)

**A sermon by Canon Todd Smelser**

Some of you know that my mother moved here three years ago to be closer, and to try out apartment living. At ninety-one she now needs to use a walker to get around, and can't get to church or symphony like she used to, but is still very engaged, and reads the *AJC* and the *New York Times* every day. After decades of being in different states and circumstances, and after a period of adjustment for both of us, it has been a real gift to have these times together, and to reinforce that special relationship of parent and child, of mother and son. I grew up in a family in which women were very present in my life. I had three great-grandmothers alive until I was 11, and both my grandmothers were a big part of my life until my thirties. I can still remember Miss Connaway, my kindergarten teacher and Miss Stelle, my first grade teacher, and of course Mrs. Hartley, who gave me piano lessons for so many years. None of these women would have said that they lived extraordinary lives, but to me they were models of faithful, patient and very loving presence in my life.

I have now been ordained in the Church long enough to remember when we didn't have women priests celebrating and preaching and providing pastoral care. That change in our church life was, as some of you remember, a very contentious period for our Church, but time and experience has changed attitudes and perceptions. Today our seminaries often have more women students than men, our Presiding Bishop is of course a woman, and I can't imagine doing ministry here without the offerings of Beth and Carolynne, and the very gifted women of our support staff. Politically of course, this has been a year in which women now number 81 in the House, and 20 in the Senate" – certainly not parity, but a marked increase since the mid- 1980's, when there was one lone woman in the Senate.

Today, in our Lectionary readings, we have the stories of two women. One gets a whole book in her name, Ruth. The other is an unnamed widow in Mark's Gospel. Both have much to teach us about faithfulness, and perhaps about how we are to be faithful and responsive members of Church in our own day.

The Book of Ruth is an amazing story about Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, who was widowed and then lost both of her sons. She tried to send her daughters-in-law back home to their own mothers, but Ruth promised to stay with her. In the moving passage from the first chapter of Ruth we hear these powerful words. "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God." Naomi is Jewish, while Ruth is a foreigner. Written in a time when many Israelite leaders were trying to purify Israel and cement its ethnic identity by casting out foreign wives and their children from the land, the book of Ruth is a testament to a different way of living together. The themes of hospitality and fidelity undergird the importance of this little book in the Hebrew Bible. The theme of hospitality is seen because from first to last, the characters in this story are dependent upon the kindness of strangers. By the time the story reaches its conclusion, it is clear that God's story only advances through expressions of hospitality, of welcoming the stranger into our midst, not sending them away. The theme of fidelity is also seen not only in Ruth's companionship with Naomi, but in her willingness to become Boaz's wife; and the birth of their son who would become the grandfather of the great King David.

Our Gospel story is about the poor widow who puts her small copper coins into the treasury. And what would stewardship season be without the story of the widow's mite? Mark describes a very busy temple scene with lots of different characters,

which include rich people and scribes"people who knew that other people were watching them, when heads turn and talk stops as they make their entrances. Their clothes are resplendent; their airs superior. People pay attention to the rich because they have money, and to the scribes because they have status. But when the widow comes to give her gift, no one even sees her. Her clothes are perhaps shabby, and she walks into the temple precincts unnoticed. She was one of life's minor characters, one of the invisible people who come and go without anyone noticing.

The scribes of Jesus' day, on the other hand, were Jerusalem's elite, doctors of the law. They were the religious professionals, the ones to whom people turned to for guidance and counsel. They were the clergy; they wore long robes, and their names were listed in the synagogue bulletin. But unlike clergy in our day, who are paid, the scribes were forbidden to receive pay for their jobs, so they lived on subsidies instead"a little from their students, a little from the poor box, a little from the temple treasury. Some scribes were not content to take just a little, and they used their positions to get the best invitations, the best seats in the assembly, and the best wine at dinner parties. The scribes were clearly the people to watch. They were, after all, the guardians of the faith, the religious aristocracy.

But that day, Jesus was not watching them. He was not paying attention to what was happening on center stage because he was far more interested in what was going on in the wings, and in one woman in particular. She was like a victim of Hurricane Sandy"out of food, out of a home, out of power. When she lost her husband, she not only lost her place in society, she lost her name and her identity. She had become invisible. No one saw her anymore. No one, except Jesus.

He saw her walk into the temple treasury to give up her two coins, and something about her actions let him know that this was the end for her, that this was everything she had. When she surrendered her two coins, he knew that she had nothing left that was not God's. Her sacrifice was complete. When he called over his disciples to see this act, he said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

Interestingly, nowhere in this passage does Jesus praise the widow for what she is doing. He simply calls his disciples over to notice her, and to compare what she does with what everyone else is doing. He invites them to sit down beside him and contemplate the disparity between abundance and poverty, between large sums and two copper coins, between apparent sacrifice and the real thing. He does not dismiss the gifts of the rich. He simply points out that the major characters of the story are really minor givers, while the minor character"the poor widow"turns out to be the major donor of them all.

In a recent editorial in the *Christian Century*, the editor, John Buchanan, reminds us that dividing the world into makers and takers, while appealing, is rarely universally true, and not particularly helpful. 96 percent of all Americans, he maintains, have at one time benefited financially at some time from a federal government program whether it be Medicare, student loans or a home-mortgage deduction. During the Second World War, my father served in the United States Navy, to give to his country service that was so needed to preserve our nation and that of the world. Today my mom, after teaching high school students for thirty some years, now is guaranteed pretty good health care from her nation. When it comes to church life aren't we all both givers and takers? This month we are asked to pledge our financial resources to this Cathedral parish, our spiritual home. I did that two weeks ago, because I was away last Sunday. But since Hurricane Sandy hit, I am also about ready to give a donation to Episcopal Relief and Development, which will help those in need in Haiti, one of the Diocese of our Church, as well as those still in need on our eastern coast. We give, because of the example of the widow in our story, and because there is great need. We give because that's what Jesus did, when he gave his very life on the cross for the salvation of the world. But most of us are also takers. We come here for worship and counseling and fellowship and to learn. We come here for help when our child wants to get married, or when our grandparent dies. We come here for deeper meaning and understanding, and for friendships that can last a lifetime. We come here to take the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation, because we know that we can't find it anywhere else. This kind of inter-dependency is woven into human life, and our lives are often a gentle dance between being a giver and being a taker.

In today's Gospel, Jesus warns us all about hypocrisy and overly pious behavior. He also reminds us that our gifts to God and to his Church need to be lived out in our lives in concrete acts and not solely in our religious words and ritual actions. Jesus sat down opposite the treasury and watched the crowd as they brought their offerings. Perhaps Jesus is watching us this very day.

---

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*