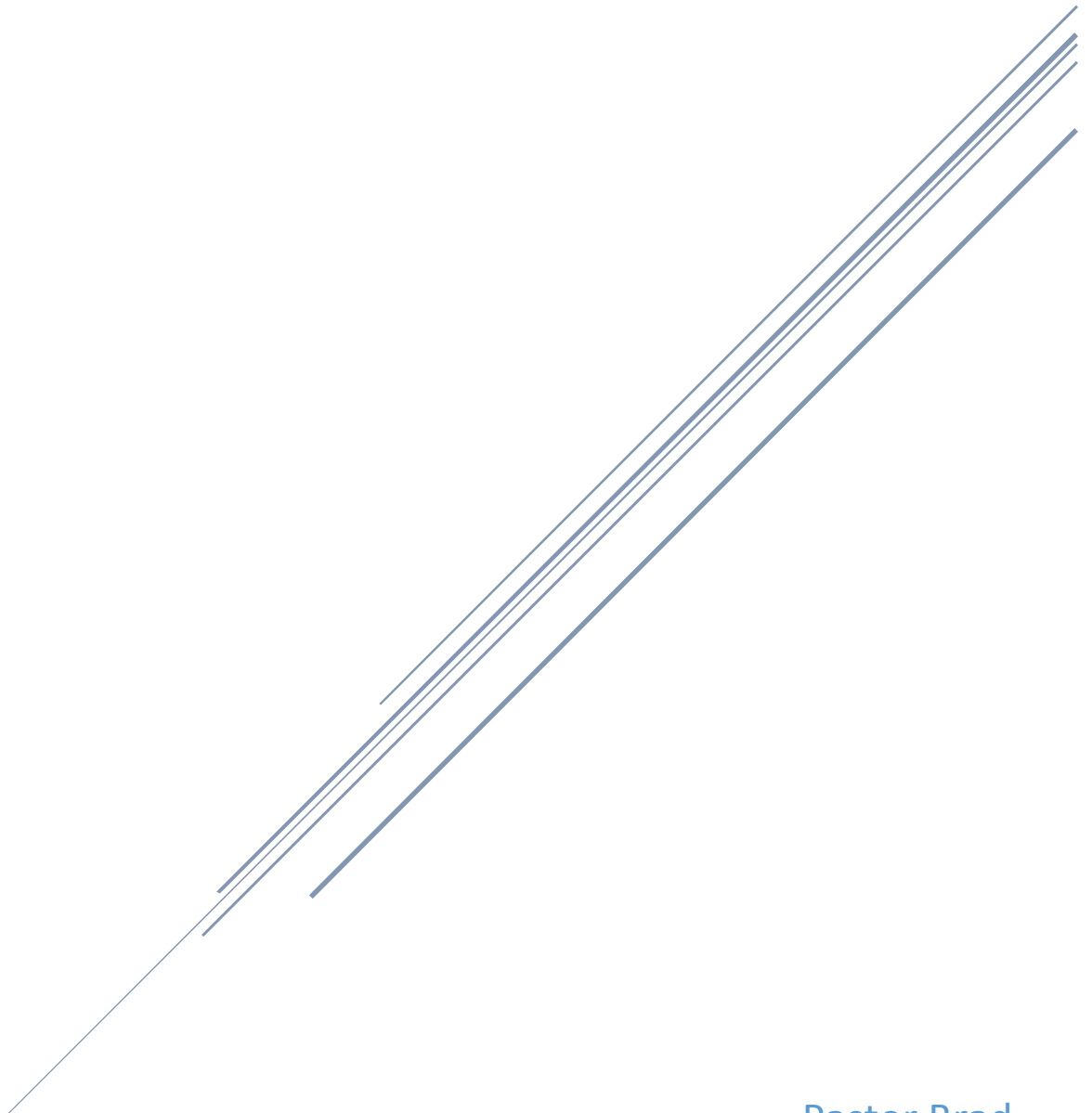


TO CHEER OR WEEP?

Mark 12:38-44



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To weep or cheer? The widow's mite is a classic gospel story. A go-to story for churches ever since we started this thing called church stewardship. Who hasn't heard the moving account of the widow who slips quietly into the temple, drops her meager offering into the treasury, and slips away, almost unnoticed.

Who hasn't squirmed a little when a well-intentioned pastor rounds the story off with the story's inevitable moral: If a poor widow can give everything she has for the Lord's work, how can we -- so comfortable, so well off by comparison -- not do the same -- or more?

I have to admit, I've squirmed, and I've felt guilty about my giving in the past -- or lack thereof. But there's something else about this story that makes me squirm.

When I read this passage, I wonder about the widow's state of mind. What was she thinking as she walked up to the temple alms box and let go of the last cent of earthly treasure she owned? Did she feel a sense of responsibility? Did she think it was the expectation of the temple that even she, a widow, must contribute to the temple, even if it's the last scrap of wealth she has? Was she afraid of some kind of retribution or shame if she didn't give?

Personally, I think she was crazy. If it had been me, I wouldn't have given one thin "mite" to the temple, let alone two. Why would she want to support the temple system - one that oppressed people like her?

Go back a couple of verses in Mark 12 and you'll find Jesus warning people about the temple scribes - those who held high honor in the institution of the temple. They "like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers" (v. 38-40).

In the very next passage, we find the widow giving all she has to an institution whose leaders "devour widows' houses"! What kind of fool is this woman? Why would she have anything to do with an outfit that will take the last of her money - and her house to boot? She must be crazy. I wish we knew her name. I hope she died with dignity.

Wait -- what? Died? Well, she probably died a few days after she dropped her last two coins in the plate. Remember what Jesus said as she left the temple that day: "She, out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

We know the plight of widows in first century Palestine. They had no value. If the husband died leaving no kids, the brother had to marry her and have children; otherwise the widow had no social value -- she didn't "belong" to anyone. She was impoverished and living

on the margins of society. She had no advocate – no safety net, no pension, no social status to hide behind. She was vulnerable in every way that mattered. Two cents short of the end.

If my timing is right, Jesus died 4 days after this story happened. If, as our friendly sheep on the back of the bulletin tell us, that the widow is Jesus, then she may have died too. Even if she wasn't a living metaphor, she didn't have anything left to live on.

But here's what gets me... What does it mean when we cheer for a destitute woman who gave her last two cents to the temple, then slipped away to starve in the back alleys of the city? Is this really a story of selflessness? Or naiveté? Or something else? Should we cheer? – or weep?

Then, to complicate the issue even more, the story of the widow opens with two verses in which Jesus blasts the religious leaders for their greed, ostentation, and blatant exploitation of the poor. “Beware the scribes,” He says. “They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.”

In other words, their piety is a sham, And their religious institution is corrupt. It doesn't reflect in any way the God that they presume to worship, the “Father of orphans and protector of widows...” (Ps 68).

In fact, over the few days prior to today's text Jesus has been talking to the disciples about the injustice and the exploitation that they see all around them. He makes a mockery of the Roman military, riding into town on the back of a donkey. He use a homemade whip to cleanse the temple of the moneychangers.

He evades the cunning questions of the chief priests, scribes and elders when they demand to know the source of his authority. And he confounds them on their questions of taxes, resurrection, and divorce.

So why on earth would Jesus praise this woman for endangering her already endangered life in support of an institution he condemns?

Actually, he doesn't. A careful reading of the text reveals that Jesus does NOT praise the widow, or applaud her self-sacrifice. He doesn't tell us that we should follow her example. All Jesus does here is notice her. And he tells the disciples to notice her.

Again, I would love to be a fly on the wall – to hear Jesus' tone of voice. Is he heartbroken telling his disciples to quit looking at those rich guys in the robes and notice this poor widow. Is he outraged at the injustice? Is he resigned to the disparity of wealth that was so common in the time of the Roman occupation? (Glad those days are over...)

What might it mean for Jesus that seconds after calling out the temple leaders as “devourers of widows' houses,” here comes just such a widow. Right on cue...

The two verses that come right after this could give us a sense of what Jesus is thinking – or feeling. As they are coming out of the temple, one disciple, awed by the immensity of the buildings – maybe it’s his first time to the big city – says, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!”

Jesus’ reply speaks volumes, especially if we think of it as part of the previous story, and I think it is. “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

Ouch. Is Jesus still thinking about the widow when he predicts the destruction of the center of the Jewish faith? And what does it say about the institution? He has just seen a trusting woman give everything she had to the very institution that not only refuses to protect her, it flat out exploits her vulnerability.

So shall we cheer or weep? Is there a third option? Should we call out – as Jesus did – any system or religion that manipulates the vulnerable into self-harm and even self-destruction?

Jesus notices the widow. But he also notices the temple and the religious leaders who take advantage of their positions of power.

According to the people who study these things, one of the contributing factors for the overall decline in church membership or attendance is that the church no longer demands our all – all our mites!

Of course, churches still have no problem asking for our mites when the plate passes by -- and especially during pledge season, right? But they – we – just aren’t demanding all our ‘mites’ - everything we can offer in order to bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth.

Those who disagree will remind us of the growth of the fundamentalist churches. Thousands gather every Sunday morning to hear preachers like Creflo Dollar, Joel Osteen, or Rick Warren. Their bank accounts are overflowing with ‘mites’ from the rich and poor. They demand all the ‘mite’ of their followers, don’t they? ...regularly filling their offering plates to the brim?

Well, yes and no. Recently, a church in Georgia kicked a 92-year-old woman out of its congregation for failing to tithe what it considered an adequate amount. She had been a member for more than 50 years.

So, while they do demand the financial commitment, beyond that, all the followers of these preachers are required to do is commit to a list of doctrines or beliefs. If you believe rightly, say, in the inerrancy of scripture, or the virgin birth or the physical resurrection, or certain things that have nothing at all to do with scripture, you’re in – no fuss, no muss – no thinking required.

These congregations are growing because it's easy to be part of them. I get that. My undergraduate work was done at pretty conservative college and I can't tell you what a relief it was that finally, someone could tell me what the "truth" really was. I didn't have to think any more. "The Bible says it, I believe it, end of discussion!" It's what Dietrich Bonhoeffer referred to as "cheap grace" – where grace is merely a doctrine. But grace without cost is not grace at all – it's just an intellectual idea.

Jesus noticed that the widow understood what costly grace is all about. We talked about it a while ago when Jesus said we ought to count the cost of being a Christ follower. To take up the cross, carry each other's burdens, and do our best to actually be like Christ in our actions -- before our words...

The widow understood that it takes all we have – our last dime, our last ounce of energy, our last drop of compassion – to anyone who is in need, theological friend or not.

I think Jesus also noticed the widow's courage. I imagine it took considerable courage to make her puny offering alongside rich and powerful men with fistfuls of money. It took even more courage to see her last hope for security – her next meal -- slipping through her fingers. And still more to swallow the panic and the desperation -- to swallow the very human instinct to cling to life no matter what. Imagine the courage it took-- and faith -- to let go and to face her end with hope.

Maybe another thing Jesus noticed was the woman's dignity. She must have had to steel herself when the death of her husband rendered her worthless in the eyes of her friends and people she knew – labeled 'expendable' even in the temple she loved. Surely, in spite of all the evidence, she had to trust that her tiny gift had value in God's eyes.

Lastly, I wonder if Jesus noticed a certain kinship. Her story mirrors his. The widow gave everything she had to serve a world so broken it probably killed her. Four days later, Jesus gave everything he had to serve -- to redeem, restore, and renew -- that same world.

Today, as we're bombarded by the lies and vitriol of presidential politicking, and all the hot air that's been blown around – or not – about economic injustice; as poor and middle class Americans continue to vote against their own best interest; as the religious leaders of today continue to receive money from those who can't afford it for their 'mega-churches' and their \$6m jets; shall we cheer? Shall we weep?

Or shall we finally notice and rededicate our efforts to act on the voice of God that calls for justice – for the raising up of the low and the oppressed? For the lord watches over the strangers, and upholds the orphan and the widow.

Amen.