

**OPENING:**

It's a quirk of the lectionary schedule of readings, that the week after our Stewardship season ends, that the story of the Widow's offering, often called the "Widow's mite," appears as our Gospel lesson today.

It's not a quirk of the lectionary, however, that again today we hear about a woman who temporarily arrests the movement of Jesus' ministry. This is a remarkable scene, but also one, along with the stories of the Syrophenician Woman and the hemorrhaging girl, that is a part of a larger pattern in Mark's Gospel that we have heard over the last few months. All of these female figures force a reaction by Jesus and bring about something unexpected.

Here, the widow's sacrifice stops Jesus in his tracks. Because of her presence, Jesus pauses, and calls his disciples to him. We do well to pay attention to these, not to mention the story from Ruth, another widow, in our Old Testament reading, to probe what they have to tell us.

**WIDOW'S OFFERING:**

Like all the best stories in Scripture and elsewhere, the story of the widow's offering makes you pause and ponder what exactly is going on. What is Jesus meaning to say here, what is the Gospel calling us to do?

One strand of interpretation, perhaps the conventional viewpoint, celebrates the widow's meagre contribution, and recognizes her as an exemplar of proportional giving, comparing her with the rich who contribute only a mere pittance relatively speaking. This interpretation links her act of self-giving with Jesus' sacrifice of self on the Cross. This interpretation implies that we should follow the widow and Jesus in our behavior, both in our financial giving and in our very lives.

Another strand of interpretation draws a much different conclusion. It says that Jesus is *lamenting* the widow's behavior, criticizing the fact that the religious authorities have convinced her to contribute what little she has. This interpretation uses the context of the whole narrative to suggest that Jesus is offering a critique of the socio-religious system that promotes such inequality in the first place that

allows for destitute widows. This interpretation depends on the passage that immediately follows, in which the disciples marvel at the “marvelous stones” of Jerusalem’s Temple that the widow’s contribution has gone to build. Jesus immediately chastises them and predicts, correctly, that it will all soon be destroyed.<sup>1</sup>

Which should we choose?

The Church, generally speaking, has chosen the former. The bills must be paid. But let’s explore the latter.

### **ONION ARTICLE:**

You might remember an article in the *Onion*, the online satirical website, that was published a few years back. Entitled “Mom Spends Beach Vacation Assuming all Household Duties” this article features a picture of a forlorn mother doing the dishes dutifully while peering out the window of the family’s beach cottage. The article reads:

*Continuously doing laundry, cooking, or vacuuming in her family’s rented beach cottage this week, area mom Catherine Yardley has spent a much-needed vacation performing all her usual household chores while in closer proximity to the ocean, sources confirmed. “Isn’t it nice to just get away for a while and relax by the water?” Yardley said as she wiped down the kitchen counter and then took out the garbage, tasks she would normally perform at a distance of 200 miles from the beach instead of 50 feet.<sup>2</sup>*

This article, in its own way, offer troubling notions of what sacrifice looks like when analyzed from the standpoint of gender. Like the story of the widow’s offering, if understood through the second interpretation, It also makes one ask how the church and society have participated in thinking about shared labor and who is called to sacrifice what.

### **STANTON:**

Here is Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the famous abolitionist and leader of the American suffrage movement, talking about this very issue:

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth S. Malabon. 1991. “The Poor Widow in Mark and Her Poor Rich Readers.” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (53): 589-604.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theonion.com/mom-spends-beach-vacation-assuming-all-household-duties-1819575406>

“Men think that self-sacrifice is the most charming of all the cardinal virtues for women... and in order to keep (this system) in healthy working order they make opportunities for its illustration as often as possible.”<sup>3</sup>

In the 1890s, Stanton worked, alongside other women scholars, to publish the *Woman's Bible*—a controversial commentary of the Bible itself. The *Woman's Bible* sought to diminish the sexism of previous translations of the Bible and point out where Scripture and previous interpretations supported patriarchy.

The *Woman's Bible*, as you might expect, caused a firestorm in its day, and received great criticism from religious and political leaders of that time. Even Stanton's fellow leaders in the suffrage movement criticized the book's publication to the point that Stanton was eclipsed by Susan B. Anthony and others in leadership of that movement.

In the *Woman's Bible*, in the section concerning our passage, Stanton wrote that the widow's offering was to be commended, but that self-development, not self-sacrifice should be the goal for women.

In some sense, Stanton is echoing that line of Jesus: “Beware of men in long robes who devour the houses of widows.”

Many scholars have agreed with Stanton, pointing out how the virtue of self-giving, unconditional love, *agape*—which plays such a large part in Christianity—can actually be a smoke-screen for a misaligned distribution of the common effort such that it causes pain and hardship upon a distressed class.<sup>4</sup>

## **CONTEXT:**

We don't live in Stanton's time, nor do we live in the widow's context. Understandings of gender have changed tremendously to the present day. We would be naïve, however, to isolate them to a historical time bubble.

I was once at a church conference where a social psychologist was outlining how gender still plays a role in the economic and legal and social inequality in our

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<sup>3</sup> Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. 1985. *The Woman's Bible. I: 184.*

<sup>4</sup> Andolsen, Barbara “*Agape* in Feminist Ethics” in Daly, Lois K. 1994. *Feminist Theological Ethics: a Reader.* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press. 151.

country, and in our churches.

The report was very disheartening, one of those conferences where as a white male, you start to sink into your seat more and more as the presentation goes on.

Eventually, it came time for the question & answer period and someone, a man, a white clergy person, asked “What do I do as I an ally—as a cis, white, male person of faith—what do I do in this situation? ... what is my role? Should I just leave?”

The speaker responded carefully but firmly “No, your role is last.”

Those words caused a small hush to go over the crowd. I, for one, did not particularly like hearing them.

I imagine they landed with the same jarring, clanging sound that the widow’s coins dropped into the Temple basket did.

## **CONCLUSION:**

The widow at the temple, the Syrophenician woman, the Hemorrhaging woman, Ruth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, they all provide uncomfortable examples for us all, of how we live in this world. They were uncomfortable in Jesus’ time, they should be uncomfortable for us.

In that uncomfortableness, in the unsteadiness of our times, we encounter Jesus’ teachings. Jesus calls out to us saying “I desire mercy not sacrifice.”<sup>5</sup> In our troubled world, one besieged by violence and division, we yearn to hear that message in our political world, in our financial giving, and in our relationships with one another.

**AMEN**

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 9.13