

Title: The journey goes on

Text: Mark 12: 38-44

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This week my sense of helplessness to enact change in our world grew:

What with continued floods in Spain, the fires in California, the USA elections, the Israeli-Palestinian name-calling and attacks in Amsterdam...

A local increase in fentanyl use and further debates on how to care for those who live with addictions.

And I remember. I remember that for years and years, people have faced wars, famines, great depressions... and found a way to dig deep and hold steady.

And most often, it is the ordinary person that leads the way of peace.

In our gospel today, Jesus focuses the disciples' attention on the simple actions of 'a widow'. Different from today, this was a person in the 1st century who was stripped of all power, of all the rights to ownership, of all capacity to make decisions, of all influence on others.

Jesus watches this woman give over all she had to the temple. A system that was robbing her blind.

In the aftermath of losing a husband in the first century, a woman, would lose the rights to the estate. And it would be taken over by the state or by the temple authorities – the Scribes.

Through their public reputation for piety and trustworthiness (something Jesus points out as they strut with their robes and "pretext of long prayers"), scribes would earn the legal right to administrate estates. As compensation they would usually get a percentage of the assets; the practice was notorious for embezzlement and abuse.

And the only way for this woman to survive without her rights to manage her affairs, would be to marry again – Hebrew Law stated that for her protection, her husband's brother would need to marry her.

**So, this woman was bereft of everything.
And still she gives all she has to the temple.**

It's a strange action and commentators go two ways.

Let's look at both options and reflect on the implications for us.

First there are biblical scholars who commend her. In spite of all that the authorities have done to her, she makes her own decision to follow her values and give to a faith that sustains her.

The beginning of this long passage in Mark begins with a question asked of Jesus by the political and religious leaders: By what authority do you do these things?

And it ends with a woman who has no authority being commended by Jesus for her actions.

Perhaps in this interpretation we are asked to think about authority.

- Do we need it to act?
- Do we need authority to lead?

Such an important consideration in a world where people in political office, and in institutional positions of power, are offering an authoritative leadership that may not align with our personal values.

Ronald A. Heifetz, a scholar in public leadership writes about the creative deviance of leading without authority, in his book leadership without easy answers.

He says that it is rare to see leadership exercised from high office because of the constraints that come with authority. And in **public life, people generally look to their authorities to solve their problems** without putting their own skin in the game.

By contrast those that lead without authority or lead beyond the authority ... **push others to clarify their values, face hard realities, and seize new possibilities, however frightening change may be. Instead of providing answers that soothe, they can more readily raise questions that disturb.**

It is obviously more complicated than this - for leading without authority means that there are no formal checks and balances or accountability for behaviour.

But when I think of daily acts of justice, love, compassion, hospitality that can lead the way: I long for each of us, no matter how disempowered we feel, to be free to act without needing an authority figure to give permission.

I think of a staff assistant who speaks up at a meeting even though she has no authority to do so. And what she says is so important but has been missed from those in authority who do not have her perspective as a mother, surviving month to month.

I think of someone who ran an unauthorized experiment on the use of kelp to restore ocean health and later announces the results when most needed.

Or in the early hours of a disaster, ordinary people who step forward and mobilize others to face and respond to the crisis.

And this woman, a widow, is our leader when it comes to enacting good without authority.

“Empowered by her faith,
unswayed by social expectations,
she has made her choice.
This is the widow’s might.
May it be your power as well”

(Steve Garnaas-Holmes)

Second there are biblical scholars who think that Jesus is using this woman’s actions as a way to condemn the value system that motivates her actions – Jesus condemns the people who conditioned her to give all she has to a corrupt institution.

One such scholar is Ched Myers, in his book, *Binding the strong man*:

Here is how he get to this decision:

The episode begins with Jesus taking a position seated “facing” (kateanti) the temple treasury (12:41).

This stage direction is proleptic of judgment, for Jesus will shortly “face” the temple mount in order to predict its demise (13:3).

In this scene Jesus carefully “scrutinizes” (etheōrei).

The author of Mark reveals Jesus’ class consciousness (cf. 10:21) through the use of extreme opposition in his description of what happens next: many rich persons put in from their abundance; one poor widow put in two little coins.

The contribution of the widow, lepta, was a term “used in late Greek for the smallest coin in circulation” (Taylor, 1963:497).³

At this point Mark chooses to reintroduce the disciples (absent since 11:27). The phrase, “he called them to him” (cf. 3:13), and the Amen signal that we are about to receive an important teaching (12:43). For a second time Jesus poses the stark contrast: they all gave from their affluence... she in her destitution gave everything she had—her whole life.

He concludes: **The temple has robbed this woman of her very means of livelihood (12:44). Like the scribal class, it no longer protects widows, but exploits them.**

As if in disgust, Jesus “exits” the temple—for the final time.

Not something we want to share in stewardship month! But remember this is about someone who has nothing, no voice, no resources.

This has led me to reflect on the ways we interact with people who have less power and how we might facilitate choice for people who may be conditioned to think that they have none.

Diamond Approach scholar (Julie Diamond) highlights that human beings can gain power from a number of sources:

- Authority – given to you by virtue of a position
- Expertise – knowledge, information and skills
- Social Status – rights, advantages, access, and resources granted or denied because of social identity, race, gender,
- Informal – is a rank within a group based on degree of belonging, e.g., popularity, seniority, and alliances.

But there is also experiential power - knowledge and wisdom that comes from life
And personal power – a sense of worth, coming from a deep understanding of being beloved.

I look at all the ways that I have been afforded power...

And I think of the responsibility I have to become aware of my power and to self-manage it wisely.

To critically reflect with humility:

- On my values and biases (most hidden beneath the surface)
- On systems and structures that sustain them
- And to resist complicity in oppressive systems and structures.

We might reflect on some questions about ourselves as we seek to enter into relationship with someone:

What privileges and oppressions have I accrued by virtue of my social position?

Did they have the same?

How have my knowledge, values, and beliefs been shaped by dominant White Western ideas?

How do I see those ideas in relation to other worldviews and ways of being?

What might have shaped this other person?

How do structural, systemic, and institutional forces, historically and currently, facilitate, or constrain me, my family and my culture?

How have these forces facilitated or constrained this other person?

I end with a poem by American Episcopal priest: Steve Garnaas Holmes called the Journey goes on:

The journey is not over.

It never is.

Justice is not a statue we erect,

and then we're finished.
Justice is a dance we are either dancing
or not dancing, every day.
The music is always playing.
Evil—selfish fear—
is always making noise,
trying to drown out the music.
But deep down the goodness lives;
the music is always there.
We are always invited to dance,
to show kindness with grace and courage,
to dismantle hateful systems,
to relate with tender love
even amid hate and anger.
Every triumph and disaster,
every step forward and back,
is part of the dance.
Regardless of what happens
today or any day,
do justice, love kindness,
and walk humbly with God.
The journey goes on.

Amen.