

## “Four Widows”

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Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13, 17b + Mark 12:41-44 = the widow's mite

In Indonesia about once a month, a couple of women would come to our door gathering our used newspapers. Bent over with heavy loads of paper, they were the only available recycling system. It was amusing in one way. We would have gladly donated the paper. But no, with dramatic flourish they would count out every page, and then would purchase the papers, paying us a pittance for them, a few pennies for a large stack.



But those few pennies represent the difference between begging and offering a needed service ~ the difference between a handout and a job ~ the difference between being destitute and entrepreneurs. They would gather papers from all quarters of the city, in turn sell them to merchants to wrap purchases ~ raising a profit of a few dimes for a day's labor, enough to eat a simple meal of fried rice, enough to live.

In today's texts, the four widows face the same predicament. Now you say, “wait a minute, I only count three:” Ruth and Naomi, that's two. The poor widow in Jesus' story, that's three. Yet there is a fourth who drops out early. By the end of the first chapter in Ruth, Orpah, Naomi's other daughter-in-law, also a widow, Orpah is out of the story.



Remember how after all three of their husbands had died in a famine, Naomi, no longer able to support them, in despair tries to send Ruth and Orpah away. Orpah goes back to Moab never to be heard from again, but Scripture says Ruth “clings to Naomi.”



All four of these widows have one thing in common. Choices for widows in Ruth's day and in Jesus' day were

the same: prostitution or begging. The more honorable choice of course was begging and that is precisely what Ruth and Naomi chose.

Part of the covenant between God and Israel were special provisions for the vulnerable, the orphans, the widows, everyone crushed by life and circumstances. God's covenant stipulated that the corners of the field be left unharvested. The reapers were forbidden to glean through the field a second time, thereby leaving a little grain for widows, orphans and all others in need.



We don't know what Orpah chose, but Naomi and Ruth chose gleaning the fields after the reapers passed ~ picking up the trodden grain that spilt onto the ground, the missed stalks, the corners of the fields. It was not much but it was honorable. Naomi being too feeble, Ruth gleaned for the both of them.

What is so special about widows that Jesus and God give so much attention to them? Could it be that God has a special place, an affirmative priority for widows, the weak, the vulnerable, the margins?

The widow in Jesus' story had the same choice: beggar or prostitute. Quite obviously this widow made the same choice as Ruth and Naomi. What she contributed to the temple offering was not from her surplus ~ not from her "abundance," her discretionary income. But as Jesus observed, she contributed "everything she had." She carried her total sum and gave it all to God. Likely she would not eat for days.



Ridiculous! Sounds like Jesus was overstating his case ~ exaggerating for emphasis. No one would ever actually do that.

Well consider this: Some years ago, *Slate* the online magazine published the 60 largest givers of the year. That year Bill Gates gave \$15 million to Harvard, and that only placed him at #9 on the list. #1 that year was Samuel Skaggs, of Skaggs-Albertson fame who gave \$100 million for medical research. Maureen Dowd of the New York Times notes all this and then recognizes someone not on the list at all:

“by contrast, the inspiring Oseola McCarty, the 88-year-old washerwoman who gave her life savings, \$150,000, to finance scholarships at a local college, [she] doesn’t make the Slate Sixty.”<sup>1</sup>



That wasn’t all. McCarty gave at least that much again to her church and local charities. Obviously Oseola McCarty and many, many others are more qualified to be on a list of the greatest givers rather than the ones we usually think of who contribute large sums **“out of their abundance.”**

**W**ill Willimon describes how as a young associate pastor, his large congregation hired a church fundraiser to help with a capital campaign.

The Board was pessimistic as they were an older congregation with a high percentage of elderly on fixed incomes.

The fundraiser took the list of the major givers and came back with an analysis of the congregation’s giving patterns. He said:

“Please note ... that the majority of your top 50 contributors are ‘widows on fixed incomes.’ Please note that ... [these] ‘widows on fixed incomes’ pay about 60 percent of this congregation’s annual budget. I’d say if you want to improve the giving of this congregation, you need to talk to [these] women first, find out why they give, then try to infect the rest of the congregation with the faith of these ‘widows on fixed incomes.’”<sup>2</sup>

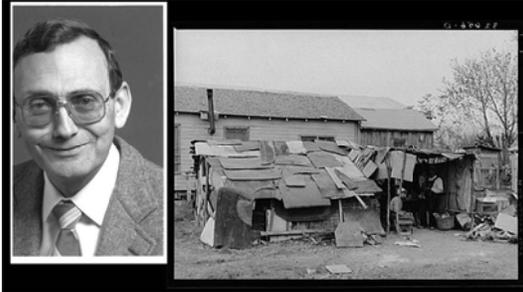
In almost every congregation, the most generous givers are not necessarily the largest givers. The Scribes in Jesus story are like wealthy members in many churches, praying loudly for appearances’ sake and great shows of largesse. Congregations invariably look to these folks for leadership, to the loudest, the angriest, the complainer. Yet these are precisely the folks congregations should not look to for leadership in giving, growth or any area for that matter.



Instead of “the squeaky wheel getting the grease,” rather in God’s community “blessed are the meek,” the quietly faithful ~ “blessed are the poor

in spirit,” the “widows” on fixed incomes or no incomes, the least expected. We should look to the spiritually mature ~ not the loudest voice, the angriest demeanor, the persistent complainer. The widow’s penny is so often overlooked, yet it shouts out with a clarion call in God’s community.

**J**ohn Coffin, a minister, was visiting a Church mission in Mexico. The mission ministered in a squatters’ camp outside Nuevo Laredo. While he

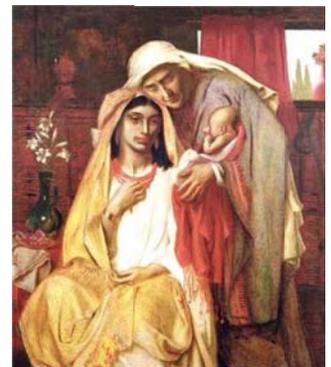


was there, one father in the camp announced that after years of unemployment he had gotten a job ~ as a scavenger at the city dump. This sounds awful to us, but for this father it was a source of jubilation.

His few possessions, all he had, were tied up in a small bundle: a worn blanket, torn pants. With tears of joy, he wanted to donate that bundle to the mission. Out of gratitude, one who had so little would give it all to God.

Still think Jesus was exaggerating? Overstating his case?

**W**hile all four of these widows face this same predicament, in fact each one reacts differently. Orpah gives up, perhaps to a worse choice. We don’t know because she disappears from the story.



In contrast, the widows Ruth, Naomi and the one at the temple, they each in their own way risk putting God’s reign first, and each in turn gets to become central in God’s story. Ruth’s son Obed literally “restores the life” of Naomi and Ruth, becomes the grandfather to David and ancestor to Jesus. Without Ruth’s faith and faithfulness, well Jesus would not exist.



We have that same choice. Though our giving of our time, talent and assets to become like Obed “restorers of life” and full participants in God’s reign. To bravely risk even in the face of adversity, of roadblocks in the path, of desperation, of deficit spending ~ to never allow our fears to submerge our faith. To risk putting God’s kingdom first so that we too can be woven into God’s great story.

<sup>1</sup> Maureen Dowd, editorial in *Dallas Morning News*, 4 December 1996, p. 29A.

<sup>2</sup> Will Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* for 12 November 2000, p. 30