

# House Devoured

November 10, 2024

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17

Mark 12:38-44

Our Every Member Canvass is coming up, beginning once we've approved a budget at the All Membership meeting next Sunday. In one sense, that makes this story of the widow's two coins just a little early. In another, of course, God's call to generosity is evergreen, always in season.

So. Give everything you have to the Church of the Holy Cross. Down to the last two pennies.

I'm kidding. Unlike some of Jesus' contemporaries, the scribes he criticized so harshly, the ones who devoured widows' houses, I'm kidding. Unlike some of my own contemporary religious leaders, who call for major donations while buying mansions and private jets, I'm kidding.

Keep the last two pennies.

All right, I'm kidding again.

But you see the problem, right? It's a good thing for people to be generous to their faith community, to their neighbors, and to strangers. Love makes the world go around, as the saying goes, and giving goes with love. Do you love someone? You give them what they need. You give them what will delight them. Do you love God? You give God things. You give what will delight the Holy One.

Like two small coins. Or as we might translate it, she gave "her whole life." That's how it reads in Greek.

Having warned of religious leaders who devoured the houses of widows, Jesus watched it happen right in front of him, recognized it, named it, and, I would guess, wept.

D. Mark Davis writes at [LeftBehindAndLovingIt](#), "In a profound way, she [the widow] is acting with nobility and self-sacrifice and she is contributing toward an unjust system. She is giving all that she has and she is abetting a system that will take away all that she has. It is truly a tragic situation facing the widow, because her means of practicing true piety is at the same time a system that is devoid of justice and will, in turn, exploit her."

As it did.

It wasn't supposed to. The Law and the Prophets of ancient Israel made abundantly clear who was to be protected and cared for in that community: the widows and the orphans. Oh, and the foreigner, too. As Sung Soo Hong writes at Working Preacher, "If the leaders had kept the Law (for example, Deuteronomy 24:19–20; 26:12–13) and feared God, who is portrayed as the ultimate defender of widows in many passages of the Hebrew Bible, the widow in our passage would have not become that poor. The widow's extreme poverty is the evidence that the leaders have failed."

And they still invited her to put money in the treasury.

Debie Thomas asks at JourneyWithJesus.net, "Should we cheer or weep in the face of this story? Or — here's a third alternative — should we call out (as Jesus did) any form of religiosity that manipulates the vulnerable into self-harm and self-destruction? Any form of piety that privileges long-winded prayers over works of compassion and liberation? Any version of Christianity that valorizes soul-killing suffering as redemptive? Any practice of faith that coddles us into apathy in the face of economic, racial, sexual, and political injustice?"

My answer to Ms. Thomas' question is: Yes. We should call it out.

Don't give us your last two pennies.

I say that despite having a certain amount of anxiety about the financial situation of this church. The pandemic has been hard for us. We have spent more than we brought in for four years for several reasons. Our expenses, as you might expect, haven't gone down, and some have gone up. Insurance has been a major headache. Our income has suffered. During the pandemic we lost revenue from rentals of space on our campus, and that hasn't yet returned to 2019 levels. Our members maintained faithful levels of giving, for which I'm grateful, but there have been fewer of them. Mercifully, we lost very few people to COVID in this church, but some people moved away, and other people's health deteriorated, and some precious people died. I'm afraid that during COVID none of us in leadership here, starting with me, figured out how to welcome new people into this congregation through the virtual space. We're delighted that new people have joined in the last year, but that's still nearly four years of losses to make up.

The budget you'll see in the mailing from our Moderator, Stefan Tanouye, projects a substantial deficit. I simply don't know how to cover it. Except.

To ask you.

Sometimes when strangers ask me what I do for a living (which isn't often; most people in Hilo recognize me for some reason), I'm tempted to say that I'm a professional beggar. I literally ask people for money, money that I live on, every week. You might say, "No, pastor, it's the lay reader that says such things," and you'd be right, except for one thing:

Where do you think the invitation to the offering they read comes from?

That's right. The professional. The professional beggar.

That's OK. I signed on for this thirty-six years ago. Frankly, I just wish I was better at it.

If I was really good at it, do you suppose we could afford a mansion for me and a private jet?

I really do wish I was better at begging because it really isn't about me. It's about the church. It's about maintaining a space in which we can worship. It's about providing compensation for the hard work of the people who make the music, print the bulletins, and clean the floors. It's about making spaces available for people to support one another through hard things, for celebrating the blessings of life, for learning about God and God's world. It's about having the means to assist those who are hungry, homeless, or hurting. It's about providing nourishment for the soul, perhaps starting with actual bread (or breadfruit; this is Hawai'i, after all). It's about sustaining ourselves in a community living out its mission as part of the Body of Christ.

That's worth begging for.

What do you think? Is it worth giving for?

That's a good ending, don't you think? "This church is worth begging for. What do you think? Is it worth giving for?"

I'd like to end it there, but I can't.

You see, it's not just religious leaders like me who devour widows' houses. It's other leaders, too. People who underpay their workers, and perhaps have either not read or simply ignored these words from Deuteronomy 24: "You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns." People who reduce the taxes on the very wealthiest and pass on the debt to future generations. People who separate fleeing refugee children from their parents and essentially create orphans when they neglect to track either the children or the adults. People who lie as casually as I drink coffee.

The United States has re-elected as President a devourer of widows' houses. Plain and simple. Already his followers have sent messages to African American children telling them to report for sale as slaves. Already his followers have sent messages to women: "Your body. My choice."

I have no words of comfort about this, and I have no patience with those who deny the extraordinary risk now faced by a number of people. What rights will be maintained by LGBTQ people? The Constitution, I'll remind you, makes no guarantee about the rights of women except the right to vote. Religion is protected by the Constitution – but who defines religion? May not a Congress or a court conclude that "religion" must meet certain criteria? As for race, well. The Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution guaranteeing equal protection under the

law did not protect American citizens of Japanese origin – including children – from being incarcerated during World War II. Oh, and having that upheld by the US Supreme Court.

I am not optimistic.

I will also not give up the faith. I will not surrender in advance. I will not permit the widows and orphans of our day, the most vulnerable of our neighbors, to have their houses devoured by a government unrestrained by moral sense, sound judgement, and effective oversight, without my voice raised in protest.

I do not expect to succeed. Jeremiah didn't. Hosea didn't. Amos didn't. Elijah didn't. The nations they sought to guide went their own way. Others preserved their words and stories because, it turned out, they'd been right all along to plead for the welfare of the widows and the orphans, the most vulnerable of their societies.

Jesus didn't succeed, either. Perhaps if the Temple scribes of his day had given up devouring widows' houses, the calamitous war with Rome wouldn't have happened, and the Temple would be standing on Mount Moriah today. But Jesus didn't persuade them. He went to the cross instead.

He transformed that failure into the possibility of new life.

Don't give us your last two coins, people. We need the money, but more than that we need to be faithful to our obligation to care for one another. Don't help us devour your house. Do help us maintain this house as best you can, but no more.

As you do, watch and see where the other devourers approach. Watch, see, name, protest, and act.

Amen.

*by Eric Anderson*