

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Mark 12:38-44 *Widows' Ways*

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38As he taught, Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces, 39and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. 40They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely."

The Widow's Offering

41Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. 42But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny.

43Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. 44They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."

It's been a while since Micah died. I keep thinking I should be over it—my year of mourning is over—I'm not wearing black anymore—everyone around me has moved on. But, I just can't stop thinking about him. Sometimes, now you're going to think I'm crazy when I say this, but sometimes I see him—I swear I really see him—I see him right there in our house sitting back on his heels in front of the fire—just like he used to do after work on a chilly night. And sometimes I hear him talking to me—sometimes it's about mundane things like who I should have come and fix the thatch on the roof. But sometimes it's more important stuff. Sometimes I hear him telling me that he loves me or that we'll be together again soon or that he's proud of me.

Now I can tell all of you these crazy things because you're strangers. I don't know you and you don't know me and there's a certain comfort and candor that anonymity affords. But when I mention any of this stuff to my friends, I see the looks in their eyes. They think I'm crazy, that I've gone nuts, that I've finally really lost it. And so I don't bring up seeing him or hearing him. In fact, I've just completely stopped talking about him because whenever I do they get a bored look as if to say, "Been there, done that." And so I just act like I'm okay and things are back to normal.

But I don't even know what normal is anymore. For me, normal died when Micah drew his last breath. We got married when I was 15. I'm fifty now—that's thirty-five years of being together. It got to the point, after being together for that long, that I didn't know where I ended and he started. And so when his life ended, I felt like mine did too.

I admit that my friends were great at first—they came over to visit, they took long walks with me, they hugged me while I cried, and we went to Temple together. But all of that ended a few months after Micah died. They all went back to business as usual. And now, when I'm with them, I try to be happy and chipper—I try to be my old self. But that's just not who I am anymore. I'd like to be the old me, but like I said, a lot of the old me is gone—it died right along with Micah. And besides, I can't even afford to do the things I used to do with those girls. When Micah was alive we had a little extra money now and then and I enjoyed going to the marketplace with my friends. Some days I'd splurge and buy a cubit or two of fine fabric or even, on really special occasions, some perfumed oil to wear when I was with Micah. But now I'm lucky if I can earn a few copper coins doing laundry for someone for a week. All of that

extra work and just two little coins—but those two little coins buy me the food I need for a week so I don't really have much of a choice.

I never thought it would be this way. I guess that in my head I know everyone dies, but I never really thought Micah would die and I'd be alone. Or maybe I just always thought I'd go first. Regardless, I never expected this and I certainly wasn't prepared for it. And it's not just my broken heart or aching spirit that were unexpected, it's the really practical stuff too. I'm embarrassed to ask my neighbors for help but I don't really have a choice—I can't carry in the wood I need for a fire and so if I'm going to be warm, I have to ask for help. And I guess, when I think about it, I'm lucky to have a home to heat at all. Technically my house is my nephew's now—Micah and I never had a son and since I'm a woman and can't inherit anything I don't have any legal rights to it. But my nephew lives all the way over in Jericho so he doesn't need this place and he's letting me live here, for now. I try not to even think about what will happen to me if he decides to sell this place—but the taxes are getting kind of high and I know it's a burden for him—but like I said, I try not to think about that kind of stuff.

And for now, thank God, I'm getting by on my few copper coins a week and the little kindnesses folks occasionally send my way—a loaf of bread here, a leg of lamb there. I'm blessed that these folks help me because without them I wouldn't be able to go to Temple.

Speaking of the Temple, things over there have really changed lately. The Temple priests used to be so helpful and kind—I'd see them taking care of old widows like myself—making sure they had food and water and shelter. But do you know that not one of those high priests—or even a Temple leader for that matter—has been to see me since my Micah died. It's like I don't even exist to them—except, of course—when I go over there to worship. They stand right beside the offering boxes to make sure that everyone—even poor widows and crippled folks and blind folks—folks who can barely get by—those priests make sure that everyone puts in an offering before going in to pray. And so if it weren't for my neighbors helping me and the laundry jobs I do—I wouldn't even be able to afford to go to the Temple and pray.

And as if those priests standing right by the doors with their offering plates wasn't enough—today there was this gang of guys, there must have been at least thirteen of them—looking unkempt and pretty ragged—standing near the Temple door watching all of this. It was weird. I don't know if they were all so poor that they couldn't afford to go in or what. But it was a really strange site—all of these grown men in decent health just standing around doing nothing in the middle of the day. And I know you already think I'm crazy what with my seeing and hearing my dead husband and all, but believe you me when I tell you that as soon as I put my offering in the plate, one of the men pointed at me—all of the others looked at me—and then the man who was pointing started talking. I was so embarrassed. I know that those two little copper coins isn't much, but it's all I had. Really, it's all I had left. I had been feeling good about being able to give at least a small offering, but after he pointed and started to talk, I felt so ashamed.

And then after the stress of going into the Temple passing by the priests at the door with their plates, and the humiliation of the guy pointing at me and talking about me, after all of that, I couldn't believe what happened when I came out of the Temple. When I came out—I saw the man who had pointed at me and talked about me—I saw him talking to one of the Temple

priests. And then, when he saw me coming out—he pointed again and came over and laid his hand on my shoulder. I felt my cheeks flush even as I discovered that the man's touch was gentle. The priest stood staring at the man and then at me with eyes flaming with indignation and anger. Then the man said, "This woman, she has given all that she has. She has given out of her poverty. And why is she so poor? She is poor because you are greedy with the Temple offerings. It is an abomination that she would give her last two coins as her offering and then go without food for a day while you, you give out of your abundance. You give only what is left over after you've covered your expenses and then some. Surely, her two copper coins, all she has left, are a far greater treasure than your pouches of gold. You give your pouches while you stand there in your velvet robes and leather shoes. She gives her coins standing in rags with a growling stomach. Do you not know that in my father's dominion, caring for the widows comes before your fine robes?"

At this, the priest balked, turned on his heel and stormed away. And then the stranger, a man who his friends were calling Jesus, invited me to join them for dinner that evening. Normally I would refuse such an offer, surely it's not proper for an unaccompanied woman to break bread with a group of men. But as I mentioned before, my life is far from normal these days and while I was in Jesus' presence everything was anything but normal and so I accepted. And when we arrived at the home where we were to have dinner, I discovered that he had invited many others like me. There was a lame man there, two other widows, and again, you're probably going to think I'm crazier than you ever did before, but I think I even recognized a woman I've seen standing on the corner of the marketplace, all this time I thought she was a prostitute, but everybody here just calls her Mary.