

This familiar story of the widow's offering, formerly known as the widow's mite, is a story I have read many times. I have preached many a stewardship sermon on it and held up the widow as a prime example of selfless giving. But this week something new caught my eye and has given me a whole new perspective on this familiar story. The difference is the connection between the two sections of this reading. Jesus begins with, as the New Revised Translation puts it, "Beware of the scribes who like to walk around...and be greeted with respect. They devour widows' houses..." and then Jesus continues by observing the offering of this poor widow, this woman who more than likely has had her house devoured, has been exploited by the religious scholars.

The widow who gave so much was a victim. Widows were particularly vulnerable in that patriarchal society. As far as I knew there was no such thing as a rich widow in that culture. Totally dependent upon male relatives for their livelihood and status, to be widowed meant that you not only lost your lifetime companion, you also lost any semblance of financial security.

So in this instance, the widow has not only been left to fend for herself because her husband has died, she is also being swindled by the religious authorities who exploit her lesser status and take from her to give to themselves.

The scribes were expected to use the temple treasury to support widows and orphans, but used it to support their own lavish lifestyles. From this perspective the woman has bought into this widow-using institution called the temple and is even giving what she has to live on to continue her support of such an institution.

When I read the passage in this light I wonder about the widow's state of mind. What was she thinking as she walked up to that offering place and put in what was the equivalent of ten percent of a working man's hourly wage? What she gave was enough to give her a couple of decent meals. What was she going to eat that night? Why did she do this—was it out of a sense of responsibility or a sense of guilt?

I remember a skit I saw a few years ago that was called *The Offering*. It was four or five people sitting in a pew and as the offering plate was passed, each person voiced the secret thoughts going on in their heads.

One of the funnier characters in the skit was the man who put his sizeable check on the edge of the offering plate, face up so that everyone could see how much he gave to the church.

But the woman who stole the show was a woman who felt so guilty about everything that she gave her offering, then decided that wasn't enough and gave everything that she had in her purse, her credit cards, her cash and everything, then that didn't feel like enough so she gave her watch and earrings and necklace and that didn't feel like enough so she finally put into the offering plate her very beautiful and expensive shoes.

Is that what the widow felt like? Did she feel so guilty that she felt she had to give her all?

Or was her motivation of a different nature?

What We Do Out of Love By Holly C. W. Aastuen
November 8, 2009 Mark 12:38-44

Candace Chellew-Hodge, who describes herself as a recovering Southern Baptist as well as the founder and editor of Whosoever Online Magazine writes that she regularly gets accused of being as crazy as this poor widow. People are always asking her why she continues to be part of an institution that oppresses her and people like her. Why does she continue to give her money to a group that would rather condemn her than welcome her?

Like the widow's devotion to an institution that would deprive her of every earthly comfort, Chellew-Hodge's persistence in staying part of the Christian church may seem crazy to people who have left the faith or never been a part of the faith to begin with. But from her perspective, she gives not because of what the church says or doesn't say about her as a person. She gives out of gratitude to God and because she thinks she has much more to offer by being a part of the church rather than leaving the church.

Sometimes when we love someone or something, what we do doesn't make a lot of sense. Sometimes when we love an institution that doesn't support everything we are or do, people don't understand why we continue to support it. Love causes us to do crazy, selfless things and because of our love of God and love of neighbor, we sometimes are led to do crazy, selfless things in service to others. It just doesn't make sense.

It is probably true that the economy of the church is not going to be made or broken by whatever proportion of God's abundance we choose to give back to the congregation. To be honest, faithful giving is not for the sake of the recipient at all, but for the sake of the giver. Faithful giving proceeds organically from the life of the giver.

We love because God first loved us and because we remain in that love and abide in God, we give all we can back to God's ministry through the church.

But love, at least any love that is going to make it long term, is more about conscious choices to work on the relationship than it is about being head over heels crazy.

That widow knew what she was doing as she gave all she had. She was saying 'yes' to the imperfect human institution called the temple because God had said 'yes' to her. 'Yes' God loves her. 'Yes' God will never fail. 'Yes she is a beloved child of God.

As beloved children of God the choice before us is—are we going to be like that widow or not? What percentage of all that God has given us are we being moved to give back to God? In this story, the woman gave what God moved her to give. For just like Jesus, this woman chose to give her all in the face of unjust structures who sought to destroy life.

As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "As far as she knew, no one ever saw her. But then again, no one ever saw her. She was all used up. Her last penny was a fortune in God's eyes. She was a percentage giver all right...she gave 100%. It took one to know one...she withheld nothing from God and neither did Jesus.

Let us pray: "Lord, who taught us that to gain the whole world and to lose our

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souls is great foolishness, grant us the grace so to lose ourselves that we may truly find ourselves anew in the life of grace, and so to forget ourselves that we may be remembered in your kingdom.” (prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr)