

Today, in our Scriptures, we meet two widows, one in the Hebrew Scripture of I Kings, the other in the Christian Gospel of Mark. Both stories echo some pretty common admonitions to faith, admonitions you've probably heard—or maybe even said yourself! Admonitions like: “Don't worry” OR “God will provide” OR “Have faith.” While these admonitions may sound like mere platitudes, let's take a listen. The widow of Zarephath and the widow putting her coins into the treasury serve as models of faithful believing and living, as they take what little they have and offer it to God, the widow of Zarephath to feed the prophet Elijah, and the widow in the temple to put “all she has to live on” into the treasury.

There's a curious problem in these stories. Did you catch it? Why are these widows in financial distress in the first place? Isn't one of the primary directives of Hebrew Scripture, one of the primary values of Hebrew life, to care for the widow and the orphan and the stranger? Why are these widows living on the edge, when their neighbors are commanded to care for them, when the Torah creates a social safety net? Why is the widow of Zarephath on her last jar of meal and her last jug of oil? Why is the other widow in a situation where her tiny contribution to the treasury takes “all she has to live on”?

The Torah expects that behind each of these widows is a community—or at least a family—to care for her, to make sure that she and her children are treated with respect and honor and have a safe place to live and enough to eat. Lacking that, being in a situation where she spends her last bite of food—or her last coin, each of these widows has come to rely, not on family or community, but on God as the one who cares for her, who provides her with what she needs for daily life. The community—or the family—may not be faithful, but God is!

So why are these widows in financial distress? For our purposes, today, we'll focus just on the widow who comes to the temple. Living in poverty, she is struggling because the scribes are more concerned with honor than they are with following the directives of the Torah to care for the widow and the orphan and the stranger. In modern parlance, that's the single parent—and the child living in poverty—and the immigrant. Why aren't the scribes following the Torah? Because they are after honor; they want to be noticed; they want people to pay attention to them. In the Jewish temple system, they are the ones with power, so they get to decide what honor is, and then they demand it from others. They are obsessive about honor—specifically, they are obsessed with being honored. They have no concern for honoring others; instead, they want others to acknowledge them. The scribes, with their superior social status, seek the best seats—seats in which they can most easily be seen by others, whether in synagogue or at banquet. They try to impress others with their long prayers, seeking not so much to intercede for those in need as to reinforce their own social power. Thinking they are more important than everyone else, they care very little about those who lack honor, like the widow. In today's story, Jesus denounces the scribes as self-important, arrogant, and self-aggrandizing, since they are concerned only with themselves, their superior social status, their power, and their honor.

The widow in Mark's story, on the other hand, has no hope of ever receiving honor, no expectation of status, no avenue to amass power. She has nothing and is nobody, at least not in the eyes

of the scribes, who don't even see her. Her only value to them is as someone to give them honor, to notice them, to see them, to look up to them. They don't even see her.

But then Jesus enters the story. As he observes the widow, as he notices her actions and her heart, he sees her. He sees that she knows, by personal experience, that, when you have nothing left, when you have no earthly resources upon which to rely, God is all you have. He sees, in her giving up of those two copper coins, her witness that she will not make it to tomorrow, save for God, who is good and graciousness and generous. He sees that she relies, not on status or power (since she has none of either), but upon God who is good and gracious and generous. And so she gives what little she has; rather than drawing attention to herself, she gives honor to God. Jesus watches the widow putting "all she has" (some translations say "her whole life") into the temple treasury, and he begins to flip the scribes' understanding of honor upside-down.

The scribes give huge sums of money, expecting to be noticed, to be honored, to be seen. The widow gives her tiny offering, not to be noticed, not to gain honor, not to be seen by others, but, rather, to give honor and thanks to God. Jesus assigns her honor as he notices the difference between her attitude and behavior and that of the scribes; she is the one to whom he points as an example of faithful believing and living, measuring not the volume of a contribution or the loudness of a demand for attention, but, rather, the humility of the heart. By the end of the story, the widow who comes to the temple has honor, but the scribes do not.

Today this widow invites us to consider what honor means, whether we have it or give it, whether we receive it or demand it. She invites you to ask whether you trust in God—or your stuff or your grades or your jobs or your talents—and whether your need for honor or attention or power or respect gets in the way of your relying on the goodness and the graciousness and the generosity of God. "What consumes your whole life?" she asks. "Where do you put your energy, your finances, your time? What do you expect in return?"

Are you giving your "whole life" to God, my friend? Are you relying upon God, who is good and gracious and generous? Are you a poor widow, trusting God—or a wealthy scribe, trusting in yourself or your smarts or your bank accounts? If the latter, then maybe you have no need to trust God. But if you are a poor widow, with nothing, and you know the goodness and the graciousness and the generosity of God, maybe you are already giving your whole life to God. Whether you are widow or scribe, poor or wealthy, God sees you, exactly as you are. God nudges you beyond self-attention, beyond self-absorption, beyond focusing on superior social status, or power, or honor; God even nudges you beyond your self-judgment as unworthy in God's sight. Because God sees you as you are, God counts you worthy as you are, God loves you as you are, and God asks you to trust, not in yourself or your stuff or your resources, but, rather, in God, who is good and gracious and generous.

When you trust in our good, gracious, generous God, the admonitions to faith in today's Scriptures become truths by which you may live your "whole life." Listen to them once more, not as mere platitudes, but, rather as words from Jesus to you: "Don't worry. God will provide. Have faith. Trust in God. Receive God's goodness and graciousness and generosity. And then go out into the world to tell others about this God who is good—and gracious—and generous, wherever you go." AMEN

*Thanks to New Testament scholar Amanda Brobst-Renaud, who offers honor as a theme in today's gospel.*