

November 7, 2021

Sermon: The Widow Who Went "All In" Dr. Rodney Kennedy

[Mark 12:38-44](#)

Do you ever have the feeling that the system is not working for you? Do you sense that the great institutions are not working for you? The government? The media? The schools? Are you unhappy and mistrustful that what you think and what you want doesn't seem to matter? Do you think that you are caught up in gigantic international and political patterns that you can't control? If so, then welcome to reality in our post-truth age. Rowan Williams says that we can feel "mistrustful when we suspect that someone's else's agenda has nothing to do with my agenda."

I have news. The story of the widow in the gospel lesson offers us a woman, a widow, who stands up to the powers and principalities and makes a difference. I intend to challenge the basic mistrust that so many have today of our democracy, our church, our nation, our government. I intend to challenge the notion that you have no control, no say so, no ability to transform our situation. My cohort in this effort is the widow down to her last two coins. Her story has convinced me that the truth embodied in a vulnerable human being is dangerous to powers and principalities. The word is dangerous to kings and tyrants and politicians. Political power should be afraid of a widow – any widow in any age at any time.

The framework for this sermon Kenneth Burke's Pentad:

SCENE (When and where was it done): The Temple in Jerusalem – God's house

ACT (What was done): A protest against economic injustice

AGENCY (How was it done): A satirical, ironic giving of two coins

AGENT (Who did it): A widow.

PURPOSE (Why was it done): Desperation and hope mixed

## SET THE SCENE

See all the power of Judaism convened in the Temple. The place was running over with politicians hoping to get God's blessings, panting like old Pharaoh, "Give me a blessing also." We also know they were throwing large sums of money into the offering plates. Nothing is more tragic than watching powerful people try to rub the guilt from the conscience by giving money. That's a lot of organized power and wealth in one holy place but they are an unholy lot. These big shots are dressed to the nines but beneath those clothes the filthy rags of unrighteousness: Big landowners, payday lenders, money exchangers, wealthy aristocrats, priests, Levites, scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, tax

collectors – the whole gang is present. This is supposed to be the house of prayer and it is the house of pretense. Who knew that if outlaws needed a hideout the house of God was the perfect place? After all, in this system the judges, the sheriffs, the bill collectors, were all on the take. “The fix was in” and everyone got a piece of the pie.

WHO IS THE AGENT? A WIDOW – A NOBODY. A POOR WOMAN.

Our agent is a poor widow standing as judgment against the assembled powers. I put my money on her. I’m already shouting, “You go girl!” Never discount widows in God’s world. God shows a preference for widows. They show up all over the Bible. Widows are a protected class in the Bible. When widows are in trouble, God sends a preacher to help. When the widow of Zarephath was down to her last meal, God sent Elijah. When the creditors were at the door threatening to take a widow’s children into slavery, God sent Elisha. Don’t mess with God’s widows! A widow may appear vulnerable, helpless, and hopeless against the power of economic injustice enacted by greedy men, but I’m telling you, “Don’t mess with God’s widows!” There’s a disturbing drama on CBS on Sunday evenings, *The Equalizer*. When people are up against powerful evil, the *Equalizer* comes to help them. Starring Queen Latifah, the show appeals to the vigilante spirit, but when widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor need help, God sends a preacher.

Give the agent a name; let’s call her Babatha. What has brought her to the Temple? Maybe, she had spent all her money on medical bills. In Mark’s gospel we find, “Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse.” Maybe she had a bad crop for two years in a row and her property was confiscated. In Matthew’s gospel we read, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye **devour** widows’ houses, and for a pretense make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation.”

Or maybe she had lost her only son – the only bread winner in the house. Whatever happened, the men gathered in the Temple pretending to worship God were responsible for her fate.

PURPOSE: WHY WAS THIS DONE? ECONOMIC INJUSTICE

Make no mistake. This is about economics. Until the church takes seriously the breaking the social disease of scarcity we are stuck in our same old tired ways. It’s always about the money. Paying debts, providing for children, living safely, getting an education, having access to affordable health care, having sufficient food – these are spiritual issues.

If you are tempted to think that this is not about economics, then turn with me to the book of Deuteronomy. Walter Brueggemann says, "If we are to think biblically about social responsibility and public policy, then we rightly focus on the book of Deuteronomy. This is the book that focuses on our responsibility for public policy. Deuteronomy is the charter for what becomes liberation theology. Faith concerns the sustained enactment of public economic justice." Our nation doesn't need more billionaires; we need fewer hungry people, fewer poor people, fewer homeless people. The book of Deuteronomy gives us the "quadrilateral of the vulnerable: the widow, the orphan, the immigrant, and the poor. Whatever your politics are when it comes to the poor and the immigrant, you need to know that you are messing with God's priorities. You are up to your church steeple in God's understanding of economics. God says feed them, shelter them, love them as your sisters. And that's in Leviticus. And Matthew 25. And Paul. And the prophets. Our democracy is threatened by what Cornell West, in *Democracy Matters*, calls "free-market fundamentalism." This is the unregulated and unfettered market as idol and fetish. The glorification of the market has led to a callous corporate-dominated political economy in which wealth and power are worshiped, and the most powerful corporations are deemed too big to fail and are given magical powers of salvation. This idolatry of corporations and wealth flies directly in the face of the teaching of Jesus. It supports the policies of Democrats and Republicans. Free-market fundamentalism trivializes concern for the public interest. It makes billionaires more important than the millions of poor people in America. God will not judge us by how many people we send to space, but how many people we feed, shelter, clothe, and give a hand. You will have to forgive me for caring more about the children going to bed hungry every night than Bill Gates divorce settlement or Brittany Spears fortune. Jeff Bezos doesn't make my top 1,000,000 concerns. This profit-driven, bottom-line thinking is "sucking the democratic life out of America." West says,

THE ACT: A ONE-WOMAN PROTEST AGAINST ECONOMIC INJUSTICE

The entire economic idolatry of our land lies exposed in the story of the widow and her last two cents. Free-market fundamentalism put the widow in dire straits. She's at the Temple because the landowners in Jerusalem had repossessed her home and land. She is now homeless and down to her last two coins. She knows that the corporate-political-religious elites are responsible for her plight, so she comes to the Temple that has become a "den of thieves" and robbers, the house that no longer knows how to worship God, and she flings her last two cents into the treasury of that God-forsaken place as an act of social disobedience and protest against the desecration of God's House.

AGENCY: THE FLINGING OF TWO COINS INTO THE TREASURY. AN ACT OF IRONY

She shouts, "You took my house. You took my land. You took my inheritance. You took my bread. You took my wine, but you can't have me. And you missed these two copper coins and now I give them to God here in the house of the God. Here is where God vindicates the widows and the orphans. "This is our house!" "Here are my last two coins." "You are high and mighty and you even think you control God's house, but you don't. This is God's house and this is the house of God's people where justice rolls down like a mighty stream.

**The widow is in the house and it is not just any old house. It is not just a house on the corner of Union St. It is God's house.** "Father of orphans and protector widows is God in his holy habitation. God gives the desolate a home to live in" (Psalm 68:5).

I'm not preaching socialism. I'm not preaching Democratic party folderol. I'm not promoting communism. This is biblical, Jewish, and Christian. This is the gospel. Jesus, in his first sermon, says that theology is economics: "Good news to the poor." There's an economic framing to life and that's biblical. I'm not a politician. I don't want the USA to be like Russia; I want us to be like Jesus. I don't want our president to be like Putin; I want our president to be like Barnabas, the man of encouragement. I am a preacher. I am not preaching Marx, I'm preaching Mark's gospel.

The safety net for the poor in the Bible is not open for debate because it is a divine commandment. It is not a political issue; it is a spiritual issue. In the house of God, it's about caring for everyone. You might want to sing "Rescue the perishing and care for the dying," but I am singing "Rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:11-17). You may not want to admit this truth, but those two coins of that protesting widow are still rattling around in temple/church coffers and she will not let us off the hook. Jesus says this widow put in her whole living – she gave all she had. She was all in and her voice is the one the church needs to hear loud and clear. Let economic justice come to America!