

“Noticing the Widow” a sermon based on Mark 12:38-44 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 8 November 2015.

What tone did Jesus use when speaking of the widow?

Many preachers suggest he used an approving tone, that he was commending the widow for her sacrificial giving. I want to suggest otherwise.

There is no note of approval in what Jesus said.

The woman gave everything she had. She was an impoverished widow in first century Palestine, a woman living on the margins of her society. She had no safety net. No husband to advocate for her, no pension to draw from, no social status to rely on. She was vulnerable in every single way that mattered.

Why would Jesus commend her for giving away what little she had left?

Let's look at the context of the passage.

Before the widow story, Jesus blasts religious leaders who are greedy and pompous and who exploit the poor.

"Beware of the scribes. They devour widow's houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers."

Their piety is a sham and the religious institution they govern is corrupt, Jesus says.

And in the days before that, Jesus scathingly criticises the economic and political exploitation he sees all around him. His procession into Jerusalem on a donkey's back makes a mockery of Roman pomp and circumstance. He cleanses the Temple's money-mongering with a whip.

Then, immediately after this story, as he leaves the Temple, an awed disciple invites him to admire the Temple's great stones and impressive buildings. Jesus' response is quick and cutting: "Not one of these stones will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

The whole apparatus will collapse.

Jesus never commends the widow, applauds her self-sacrifice, or invites us to follow in her footsteps.

So what was his tone?

Is he heartbroken as he tells his disciples to peel their eyes away from the rich folks and notice her? Is he outraged? Is he resigned? What does it mean to him, after he's described devourers of widows' houses, to witness just such a widow being devoured? And worse, colluding in her devouring?

He has just watched a trusting woman give her all to an abusing institution, one that does not protect the poor. No institution steeped in such injustice will stand. No economic system, no religious system that manipulates vulnerable people for its own gain will stand.

Just four days later Jesus was crucified for his determination to redeem a corrupted system. Four days later, did she too die because she had no money for food?

What does this story invite from us?

The psalmist says that God is the father of orphans and the protector of widows

Jesus notices the widow, and tells his disciples to notice her too. Thousands would have milled around admiring the beautiful buildings. Thousands would have given money, rich and poor. This was how the system worked. People gave. People worked. People traded. There was absolutely nothing special about what the woman did. But amid all the coming and going, amid all the people saying – well, this is just how it is. Jesus notices the widow and he asks his disciples to notice her. So small, so insignificant, so hidden. He notices her.

The Presbyterian Church has just published a booklet called Justice and Action, social transformation in our communities, a book produced by the Assembly of our Church and Presbyterian Support. It outlines some statistics, 260 thousand children living in poverty; 24% of children living in poverty.

And in relation to domestic violence, around 35 people die as a result of family violence every year. One child is hospitalised every second day due to abuse or neglect. Nearly half are under two years old. On average, one child is killed as a result of family violence every five weeks. Every five minutes, police are called to investigate a family violence incident.

The book includes an introduction by Jono Ryan, one of the ministers at Highgate. He says this:

“In our efforts to help people, the Church can sometimes end up doing the opposite. Often this is because our attention is more on our act of helping,

rather than the individual or family that we are seeking to help. We become excited about the new programme we have developed, or the profile it is getting in the media or the prospect of increasing the size of our congregation, but we lose sight of the particular faces and the uniqueness of their situation.”

Jesus noticed the widow and he asked us to notice the widow, to focus our eyes on her, not us.

Yesterday, I was talking with one of the shop-keepers at the market. I asked him about his week and he told me that he had been gardening during the week. His neighbours are elderly and cannot do as much as they could, and they don't have much money. So he offered to grow vegetables for them. They made a hole in their fence and so he is able to use their property as well as his own, to grow vegetables. Both gain benefit. And it came by him noticing the widow.

Whitianga Church gives weekly meals to people. They started it after a homeless man spoke up about his needs. That man is not now homeless and some who receive the meal help now to serve it. Others in the community contribute and that led to a community garden. And Church Council meetings have become focused on what God is already doing in the community and how the Church can be part of it.

St Andrew's in Invercargill had lost contact with its neighbourhood. But they noticed the local primary school. Retired men in the congregation built a garden for the school and it won a community environment award. One thing led to another. A men's breakfast, art classes for children, food for struggling families. And so their ministry grew.

My hero Margaret Wheatley:

“Very great change starts from very small conversations held among people who care.”

Every action started by noticing.

Jesus notices the widow.

Her courage. To make her gift alongside the rich with their fistfuls of coins.

Her dignity. Widowhood could easily have rendered her worthless, unable to be seen, not noticeable, anonymous. She had to trust, in the face of all that confronted her, that she had value in the eyes of God.

Her prophetic action. Her costly offering denounced the injustice and corruption of the system, without speaking a word. Just days later, Jesus gave

everything he had to overturn the system that abused her. Just days later, Jesus gave everything to redeem and renew the world.

Jesus noticed the widow and named the system.

In so doing, he said, let no system take from us what only God should have, God, the father of orphans and the protector of widows.

No economic system. No workplace. No Church. No secondary thing. None must take from us everything we have. That belongs to what is of ultimate worth, whom we name God, the father of orphans, the protector of widows.

In that kind of giving we are not used. Not abused. Not manipulated. Not tricked. Not sucked dry. Not exhausted of all humanness.

We are invited into a world of noticing. Noticing the widow, noticing the vulnerable one. And naming the system, and challenging the system that abuses the vulnerable, however widely it is accepted, however normal it is.

Note: This sermon draws on and uses material from the website Journey with Jesus and the commentaries in Feasting on the Word and Ched Myers.