

Coffee to Go | Proper 27 | Year B

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Ordinary Time, Jerusalem temple, widow's mite, economic justice, power and privilege, corrupt systems, spare change

SPEAKERS

Blake Smith, Karin Peter

Karin Peter 00:27

Welcome to Coffee to Go where we center ourselves in the scriptures, seasons and holy days of the Christian tradition. I'm Karin Peter. I'm here with Blake Smith, and as always, we welcome you on the journey. So we are coming to the close of Ordinary Time, or what's often called the season after Pentecost. And that means that we are coming to the close of this journey that Jesus has made from Galilee to the Jerusalem temple. And that's where we are this week. We're in the temple in Jerusalem. The temple there is the center of Jewish religion, power and economics. It's all tied together. It's a place where status and wealth or poverty all influence what happens to you as a person in this place. So, a lot goes on at the temple, including economic or financial transactions, money changing. It's why they're called the money changers in the temple. So kind of like the Global Exchange when you go to the airport to get different currency. Same deal, and it's also where they collect tithes and where they distribute goods based on the needs of the poor and vulnerable. So here at the temple, Jesus is doing a bit of people watching. So who's he watching? Blake?

Blake Smith 02:03

Well, we'll leave that, as we will find out, we'll leave that to the listeners to determine for themselves. However, it's interesting that the passage as it appears in the NRSV gives us, points to a particular thing that we're going to maybe challenge a little bit today as we talk about it. Our passage comes from the Gospel of Mark, and it's the 12th Chapter, the 38th through the 44th verse. And the title in the NRSV for this section is called a widow's generosity. What we're going to decide if that's what it's really about, or if that's all that it's about. So, let's listen...

As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance, say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." He sat down opposite the treasury and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which was worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she, out of her poverty, has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

A couple things real quick ... we mentioned in a previous episode that not everybody was against Jesus, and there's some pretty sweeping comments here in this passage about all those who came in their robes and the scribes, but we already know there's one scribe that was actually connected to Jesus, and so it's not everybody. Just want to make that clear again, that that there are some, and certainly there's a way of living and presenting oneself that Jesus is talking about more than a group of people.

Karin Peter 04:28

Yes, we don't have to play the creepy music every time a Jewish character comes on screen,

Blake Smith 04:34

Right. So, one of the indicators here that there might be something more going on is when we look at where Jesus sits, and the passage says that he sat across from the treasury. He sat opposite the treasury. So there's some language there that could be interpreted that he is sitting opposite of the place of economic power and looking in from a wider perspective of what is really taking place here. And ...

Karin Peter 05:11

I think that's really important, because sometimes we read past those things, we skip over those little pieces of like Jesus was in the temple, and he sat across the neck above but we go, oh, he was sitting in the temple, okay? And we go on, but this is Mark's gospel, and Mark uses very few words, so if he wrote it in there, he wrote it for a reason.

Blake Smith 05:33

Absolutely. Absolutely. And it doesn't help that we're pointed to a particular thing. So we're trying to get to the widow's mite. So, it's easy for us to skip over.

Karin Peter 05:42

We're just jumping over everything else. It's like, [right?] Rushing past Thanksgiving to get to Christmas?

Blake Smith 05:47

Yeah, this isn't about where Jesus sits. This is about that woman who put two coins in the treasury. So. And what we see is that the religious leaders, as we look at the passage, what we see is that the religious leaders are part of not only the religious power, but social power. As you've mentioned, the temple wasn't just a place, we think of churches and temples now, of being these holy, set apart for worship only, but this was really a center of commerce and lot, and social life in the temple. So there was a lot going on. A lot of people who would have been there to witness these things, and those religious leaders come under a bit of critique from Jesus as they display their privilege, power and piety. And he really, he really is specific about that. Their privilege, they show their privilege because they want the best seats in the places of honor. And we hear scriptures passages about that throughout the Gospels where Jesus is challenging that. Their power is shown in their position of respect, and, quite honestly, their control of the treasury these scribes are, are the ones who are then enacting what's done. The treasury would be meant to be shared so that all have what they need, and yet everybody

doesn't have what they have. So, obviously there's some issues with distribution. And finally, they're piety, and Jesus mentions a couple of things there. They're long prayers. I remember when I first started in youth ministry years ago, and youth being concerned that they couldn't say a prayer in public because the public prayers that they had witnessed, you know, used all these big words and went on and on forever. And I think about that every time I read this passage, that they had these long prayers in public for the sake of appearances, but they devour widows' houses and that of the religious laws in corrupt ways. So, when man had died, these women, these widows who have no status in and of themselves, the church, the religious leaders, were confiscating what they had and leaving widows like the one in this story, with very, very little, if anything, it is the one...

Karin Peter 08:28

say that phrase again, Blake, because the language there is intense after sake of appearances, or I'll say it, they devour widows. That is, that is intense, damning language.

Blake Smith 08:49

Again, especially like you said from Mark, who uses few words when he used them, they're very carefully... This is, this is an incredibly corrupt system that doesn't just take a little extra but as you said, and as the passage says, devours them. That is, this is the practice that leaves widows with nothing to live on. And so this widow is therefore giving, literally, the last two coins that she has, everything else has already been taken from her by perhaps, we can assume the religious elite. So we're caught in this conundrum, if you will, about the passage and what's really going on here. Do we see Jesus mainly extolling the virtue and generosity of the widow. Is this about this wonderful, faithful woman who gave everything that she had. We pick up on that and miss the victimization of the widow that has taken place? What's really underlying this passage? Yes, she had wonderful faith in the midst of incredible oppression and devouring. So, the other side of that is, is Jesus using the widow to critique unfair practices that exploit the most vulnerable. So, is this about the widow's faith, or is it really about economic justice? And as I said, before I read the passage, we'll kind of leave that to you, our listeners, to make the call on that, but would encourage you to read back through the passage and spend some time with that, because we can make this this really pretty passage about this faithful woman, which again and again, let me say she was incredibly faithful, but she's faithful in the midst of a really, really bad system. So, we can pat her on the back and move on and feel good about it, or we can say, Okay, what is Jesus really getting at here? And to do that, let's ask ourselves some questions. Here's some questions that we might consider this week. What do I see when I sit across from my "treasury?" How do I contribute to the care of the most vulnerable? Another question is, am I as faithful as the widow? Obviously, the system wasn't working for her best interest, and yet she still gave. Am I faithful during difficulties and hopeful for change? And finally, what does economic justice look like where I am? What does it mean to seek the common good and to put others first and myself last? All questions we need to ask this week.

Karin Peter 11:58

Absolutely. So I was looking in a different Bible version in the I think it's the Contemporary English Bible (CEB). And it was really interesting Blake, because up here where Mark says, they, the widow put her money in, and the others contribute out of their abundance. In the CEB, it says others contribute their spare change. And now, like, oh, so we're back to the two coins, right? [Uh huh.] Is when they say, out

of their abundance. I'm thinking, Oh, they gave a lot, because that's what we say. They gave a lot, and the widow only gave two, two bits. But you know, hers was more important, but that's that might not be what's being said, Right? They're both tossing in spare change. But what does spare change mean to someone who has been economically oppressed, and what does spare change mean to someone who lives in abundance? So, let's think about this this week as we experience it. Put a couple coins in your pocket, but the spare change in your pocket or your lunch bag or your purse, however you carry your spare change, most of us don't have real money. Go find some for this week.

Blake Smith 13:14

People use change now?

Karin Peter 13:18

Yes, and so every time you look at them, every time you touch those coins or hear them clink in your pocket or your purse. Ask yourself this question, what will I offer today to contribute to the common good?

Blake Smith 13:32

That too is a great question. Our blessing today comes from Brigid's Feasts, and the author is Bridget of Kildare Abbey in Ireland, circa 450, to 523. So, this has been around a little while.

I should like a great lake of finest ale for the King of kings.
I should like a table of the choicest food for the family of heaven.
Let the ale be made from the fruits of faith and the food be forgiving love.

I should welcome the poor to my feast, for they are God's children.
I should welcome the sick to my feast, for they are God's joy.
Let the poor sit with Jesus at the highest place and the sick.

Dance with the angels. God bless the poor.
God bless the sick and bless our human race.
God bless our food. God bless our drink.
All homes, Oh God, embrace.

Well, thank you for joining us here this week at Coffee to Go. We hope you'll join us again next time, for the next part of our journey through the liturgical seasons and holy days of the Christian tradition.