"Surprising People"
Mark 12:38-44, Ruth 3,4
November 11, 2018
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings
"Like Jesus’ surprising example of the widow, we give our whole lives to God."

Last week, we talked a bit about weddings. I commented that the most common scripture that couples choose to be read at their wedding is from I Corinthians 13: Love is patient, love is kind, love is not jealous or boastful. And that another common one is one that we read as our lesson from Ruth: Where you go, I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, your God shall be my God. And one of the interesting things we pointed out is that these passages have nothing at all to do with weddings. Well, when Erin and I got married a little more than 32 years ago, my best friend from seminary officiated at the service and we let him choose the scripture to deliver his wedding homily. And surprisingly, he chose this one, the widow and her two coins. His point for our marriage is that we should be like the widow and give everything we have to one another, strengths and weaknesses, good and bad, that even when we feel that we don’t have very much to give that we should still give our all. We should be like the widow.

Both of our scriptures today have to do with widows, the one in the temple with Jesus, and Naomi in the book of Ruth. In fact, the book of Ruth is so much about Naomi, that perhaps it should have been named after her and not her daughter-in-law. But these are both surprising texts, because widows we an often-overlooked class of people in ancient times. We first need to note that in Biblical times “widow” does not mean precisely the same thing as it does in modern society. The Hebrew word for widow, almanah, signified a woman who had not only lost her husband but who also had no other males who might support her socially and economically, such as her father, father-in-law, brother or an adult son of economic means. That’s the case with Naomi. Who does she have to take care of her? No one, really. And Ruth’s decision to go with Naomi, this widow with no visible means of support, is a surprising one. It makes no sense at all. The two women go back to Bethlehem and they are beggars. They glean the fields for grain after the harvesters have already gone through. The story of Ruth and
Naomi is the way that God use people we wouldn't expect. God takes these two penniless widows and they become the ancestors of King David. And therefore, also of Jesus.

But what about the woman at the temple? What was her story? Where are the men in her life? Maybe the other men were all dead, or maybe circumstances prevented them from caring for her. And maybe some just refused to take her in as the law would dictate. A woman with no man in her life found herself in a precarious position. We don't really know anything about this poor widow in the story today. She had lost her husband, but where is the rest of her family? Another question that occurred to me is: where did she get the money that she puts into the Temple treasury? Typically a woman in her situation would get money by begging, and if she has to beg, why does she put it into the treasury instead of keeping it? Of course the other way widows made money was through prostitution. Which raises more questions about her putting some of her earnings in the Temple treasury. If she was a prostitute, she'd be shunned publicly, but typical of Jesus, she's the one that he points out as an example. So many times in his ministry he had been questioned and condemned for consorting with sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes.

Well, we don't really know, do we?

But these passages today show that God uses surprising people. He often uses the people we wouldn't expect. We expect the word of God to come to us from the preacher, not from the teenager. We expect to see models for our lives in the rich and famous and not the poor or the refugee. We expect to find generosity in the wealthy and powerful and not in those who have almost nothing. But here is our example, our model. The widow who has almost nothing.

It's hard for me to relate to this widow. I am a man. I have a home. I have people who care about me and who would take care of me. But I can imagine myself as a person with limited means, with little financial security...this is the stuff of anxiety that keeps many of us up at night...imagining the things that could go wrong. Can you? Can you imagine yourself without home or family or financial
resources? What would you do? Can you relate to the widow whose faith is so great that she gives away what is tangible, right there in her hands, and walks away with nothing? Who do you see yourself as in this scripture? When we first read it, did you see yourself as the scribe who likes to be recognized for all the good that you do? Did you see yourself as one of the rich who put in large sums, who give a lot to the church in money and time and effort? Did you see yourself as one of the disciples, listening to Jesus’ words? Or do you see yourself as the widow? At different times, we are perhaps all of these people, or they are part of all of us.

Though we are loath to see ourselves like the scribe and we may only see a little of ourselves as the widow, we relate to scripture because it tells the story of our humanity and yes—we can all play all the parts. Some characters reveal our human weaknesses, others portray our strengths. To admire the faith of the widow is to first accept the greed of the scribe. New Testament scholar Karoline Lewis says,

> The Bible says, the Scriptures insist, and God needs that the characters we meet cannot simply be examples. They cannot be always those about whom we say, “Wow, I need to be more like” or “if I were more like…” They have to be invitations to embody how we will follow Jesus. They have to be those that allow us to imagine what the kingdom of God looks like. And that kingdom starts with whole life living.

Whole life living. Jesus commends the widow for her offering because she—out of her poverty—has put in everything she had, all she had to live on. Many translators will say that she put in her whole livelihood. The actual word in Greek is “bios.” She put in her whole bios, and yes, it can be translated as “living” or “livelihood,” but as many of you no doubt know, bios is the Greek word for “life.” She put in her whole life. **Her whole life.** Unlike the scribe, who loves the show, the widow gives out of a show of love. Last week we read that the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength. Love God with your whole self. Love God with your whole life.

The widow does that, and because the way Mark tells the story, this is the last public scene Jesus has in Jerusalem before his betrayal and arrest. Obviously this passage foreshadows what Jesus is about to do,
give his whole life for us all.

The secret to understanding this passage is to first realize that it has nothing to do with money. (So you can mentally put your checkbooks away.) It is unfortunate that those who organize the common lectionary used by so many protestant churches like us place this story in the midst of the stewardship campaign. This story is often used to encourage people to give more money by showing them the picture of this poor widow, look how much she gave in proportion to her income. She gave so she had nothing left over. Don't give what you won't miss, or what's comfortable, but instead give so it hurts like the widow and show it really matters to you. Sacrifice something for God. That's what we usually say, and I suppose I too have given a sermon very much like that in the past.

But somehow, this year, I saw it in a new way, from a new perspective and I asked myself, what if instead of thinking of ourselves as the widow or the scribe, what if we thought of ourselves as the coins? What if we are what is given to God. Not just our money, not just a few hours of volunteering a week, but all of who we are, our whole lives, from the moment we wake to the moment we sleep. That's what this passage really teaches us—it's a matter of biology, of bios, of our life. So in a way, this is not a stewardship text, it is not a story about how much money we should give to God or the church. It is a discipleship text, it is about giving our whole selves to God. What would it mean to give our whole selves to God? It means as the old Catechism says, that we belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not to ourselves, but to our faithful savior Jesus Christ. It means choosing to not find security in the love of show like the scribes but instead finding our security in the show of love we choose to share every day. The widow is blessed not because she gives all her money but because she gives all her life, because she gives it all in love, it's a show of love. And that's what we are called to do also.

That's really the surprising thing about the stories today. Not that God surprises people with whom he uses. But he uses surprising people. People we wouldn't expect. Like Naomi. Like the widow. Like
you. Like me. Like anyone who is called to give their whole life to God. Yes we will fill out pledge cards today and come forward and put them in our stewardship basket. We're not asking you to give all the money you have. But in a way we are. We're asking that these be symbols of giving our whole life to God. One of the fine passages from our constitution as a church reads that:

The Church is called to be a sign in and for the world of the new reality which God has made available to people in Jesus Christ. By healing and reconciling and binding up wounds . . . ministering to the needs of the poor, the sick, the lonely, and the powerless, . . . engaging in the struggle to free people from sin, fear, oppression, hunger, and injustice, . . . giving itself and its substance to the service of those who suffer, . . . sharing with Christ in the establishing of his just, peaceable, and loving rule in the world. The Church is called to undertake this mission even at the risk of losing its life.

That's what we're about. Whole life living, whole life giving. Our financial pledge, our time, our efforts, our strengths, our weaknesses, all that we have, all that we are. To Christ and his mission in the world.