

# Your Little Bit Matters

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**1 Kings 17:8-16; Mark 12:38-44**

In his book, *All Over but The Shouting*, Rick Bragg writes about growing up poor in Alabama.

Once when his daddy left again and his brave but heartbroken mama was nearly defeated, there was a knock at the door. It was a little boy, “the color of bourbon. He said his mama had some corn left over and please take it ma’am, we’d like it.”

“They knew,” Bragg continues. “They were poor, very poor. Living in unpainted houses that leaned. But for a window in time, they had more than us.”

“It may seem like a *little biddy thing* by 1990s reasoning. (But) this was a time when out of pure meanness, it was routine to take a young black man for a ride and leave him cut, broken, or worse on the side of some pulp wood road, just for sport, for fun.

“This was a time of horrors in Birmingham, in the back woods of Mississippi; this was a time when the whole damn world was on fire. That was why it mattered so.”

Jesus told the story of a widow who did a *little biddy thing*. She dared to drop her two copper pennies into the temple treasury while others dropped in their fistfuls of cash.

But for Jesus, it wasn't the size of the widow's gift that grabbed his attention and stole his heart. It was the size of the faith it took to let it go. That's why it mattered so.

In fact, this woman's reckless act is the last story in Mark's gospel before Jesus turns to condemn and cleanse the temple, an act that galvanizes the opposition and leads to his death. For in the end, Jesus decides like this woman, to give his all.

The story follows Jesus' latest tussle with the temple authorities. He has denounced religious big wigs who prey on the weak and vulnerable. They "devour widows' houses," Jesus mutters in disgust, "and for the sake of appearance, say long prayers."

From there, Jesus retires to an outer courtyard of the temple where women, and others deemed second-class citizens, are allowed to gather. Maybe, he on his way out; or maybe that is just the nearest, safest place to land and gather himself. In all events, Jesus plops down by the temple treasury, a row of 13 boxes with trumpet shaped receptacles on top.

As Jesus sits there, weary, whipped, and disillusioned, he watches the worshipers wander by, dropping their offerings into the gaping brass trumpets. Suddenly, a widow, shabbily dressed and destitute--like most widows in that place and time--approaches the offering box. She reaches into her tiny handbag and pulls out two copper pennies. The woman tosses the pennies into the brass trumpet atop the offering box, the pennies' tiny mass pinging all the way to the bottom. Then the woman strides away, steady, confident, and free.

Jesus' faltering faith is stirred. Nodding at the woman, he says to his disciples, "See that poor widow? Her *little biddy gift* doesn't matter much on the world's scale of value. But it means the world to me because she gave everything she had."

Some suggest this woman is exhibit a in the defrauding of widows Jesus has just condemned. Maybe so. Maybe she lost her tiny house and holdings to just such unscrupulous men. But even if that is true, Jesus doesn't cast her as a victim; Jesus casts her as an example.

Because whatever this woman's economic status or desperation, she refuses to be defined by it. Instead, she marches right up there, in front of God and everybody and powerfully

expresses her faith. She refuses to be shamed or intimidated by those who have more to give. No, she just does the little bit she can, perhaps hoping to help another widow, even more desperate than she.

I know another woman who fought hard to claim her dignity and respect. Despite being told she didn't matter much, she came roaring back with the confidence--bequeathed to her largely by Jesus—and that she matters far more than she, or those who wounded her, ever imagined.

Recently, this fellow pilgrim wrote a poem, a confession, called "One Day," that with her permission, I'll share with you.

One day, she decided to treat herself with the same kindness with which she interacted with others.

One day, she decided to be gentle with herself.

One day, she decided to embrace the child of God that she already was...

One day, she decided enough was enough and she beautifully and bravely claimed her power.

One day, she decided to be intentional about accepting who she was and live into who she was meant to be.

The next day, she did it all over again and kept doing it until she found out that the person she always was truly was one strong, resilient woman who had found her groove.

Then, when the gravity of powerlessness and hopelessness tried to pull her down, she was loving towards her mind, body and soul, her own inner trinity. Simply put, she honored her story and began writing the next chapter, one day at a time:

Perhaps that day at the temple was such a defining moment for the widow in Jesus' story. She knew her "two cents worth" was not a game-changer for either her, or the temple. The coins she tossed into the offering box were called *lepta*, meaning, literally, "a tiny thing." A *lepton* was the smallest coin in circulation. At most, two of them might have bought a morsel of bread.

This woman knew that her only hope in that moment, as in every other moment, rested solely in the grace and goodness of God. So she flagrantly tossed her last handout into the offering box, as a gutsy, defiant confession of her faith.

A work crew was laying a drain line across a college campus. While excavating, the workers uncovered a power cable. The foreman suspected it was an abandoned line, but just to be safe, he called the utility company and asked for someone to come identify the exposed cable.

An electrician arrived, inspected the cable, and assured the workers it was dead.

"Are you sure there is no danger?" the construction foreman asked.

"I'm sure," the electrician replied.

"Well then, would you mind cutting the cable for us?"

The electrician hesitated for a moment, and then answered with a wry grin, "Well, I'm not *that* sure."

The power of the widows' witness rested in her willingness to translate her faith into bold, risky action. Maybe she knew and she believed the Bible story about the widow of Zarephath who gave what little she had to feed the prophet Elijah, only to have her own needs met as well. Maybe she learned from Jesus to worry less about how little she had and to focus more on God's bounty. Or maybe she learned in the rough and tumble of her own perilous life that God could be trusted. Whatever the source of her bold, venturesome faith, it gave hope to Jesus, as twenty centuries later it still gives hope to us.

And yet, while this story involves money, it is not fundamentally about money. It is about giving one's all, giving oneself. As Jesus says in admiration and awe, "(This widow) put in everything she had to live on." Or as the phrase can also be translated, "She put in *her whole life*."

After all, the greatest gift Jesus gave was not a monetary gift; it was the gift of Himself. The greatest gift those brave veterans gave, who finally silenced the guns of World War I, 100 years ago today, was the gift of themselves. The greatest gift that heroic sheriff's deputy gave, who stormed the bar in California to confront the shooter, was the gift of himself.

So yes, today is Commitment Sunday. It is a time when we, like the widow of old, commit our financial gifts to the work of God's kingdom. But the far greater gift is the gift of your presence, the gift of your prayers, the gift of your service, the gift of yourself.

Recently, I read an essay by Jaroldeen Edwards about a time she was physically and emotionally depleted. So she took a trip to the mountains in hopes of lifting her spirits.

As she ambled about a mountainside, she came upon a vast, sprawling field of daffodils. The daffodils were awash in color, from ivory to yellow to salmon. Interspersed among the daffodils were purple hyacinths and some coral-colored tulips. With all those flowers, blazing and radiant in the sunlight, Ms. Jaroldeen was spellbound. "It looked as though the sun had tipped over and spilled gold down the mountainside," she writes.

A flurry of questions flooded her mind. How did this happen? Who planted all these flowers? Who was responsible for all this beauty?

Later, while strolling through the waves of daffodils, Jaroldeen came upon a sign that read: "Answers to the question I know you are asking."

The first answer was, "one woman, two hands, two feet."

The second answer, "One at a time."

And the third? "Started in 1958."

And so it was that over the course of forty years, the nameless benefactor had created a wonder beyond words, one bulb at a time.

If you think your little bit doesn't matter, whether to God, or to Knollwood, or even to you, then dare I say it? You are dead wrong. Because we serve a God who delights in taking little things like pennies and bulbs and mustard seeds and turning them into something significant, like service to your neighbor, or love for your child, or creating beauty for the world.

So whatever you have to give, however small or insignificant it may seem, give it with the grace and abandon of the widow who stole Jesus' heart. For she was not a victim, but a victor, as

we can be also, if we live out of our faith and not out of our fear.

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Eternal God, forgive us for discounting our little bit, forgetting that you only ask what we are able to give and able to do. So help us give *that*, trusting that every act of generosity, service and love, matters to you.

In Jesus' name we ask it, Amen.