

November 11, Ordinary 32B (Mark 12:38-44; 1 Kings 17:8-16)

## **By middle-class American standards, the widow's decision is questionable.**

by [Brad Roth](#) in the [October 24, 2018](#) issue

Little painted river rocks started turning up around our town last year, nestled in among tree roots and tucked under park benches. The rocks were inscribed with messages, like lithic fortune cookies: “You’re beautiful!” “Have a nice day!” And, of course, “You rock!” Our son’s fourth-grade class took up the project and created their own message stones. We discovered his particular bit of basalt encouragement plonked on the kitchen counter: “Survive.”

It’s less bubblegum bromide than grit-your-teeth reality check. Of course, “survive” might be just the encouragement some people need. It works for me about three-sevenths of the time. Dig in, retrench, hang on by your fingernails.

And yet, we want more than survival. We long for meaning, purpose, a sense that our lives contribute to a good greater than ourselves. We recognize, somewhere deep down, that hanging on by our fingernails does not the good life make.

Perhaps this is part of what Jesus observes when the widow gives her last mites over to the temple treasury. Rather than clinging to bare survival, she is offering a sacrifice to God.

We know the story well. While many in the crowd give lump sums “out of their abundance,” the widow drops in two *lepta*, coins of little value. But what matters to Jesus is that the widow “put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

Who knows? Perhaps this woman has seen her last funds appropriated by soft-robed, soft-palmed temple functionaries, scribes who offer unctuous prayers while they “devour widows’ houses” in sacral accountancy sleight of hand. Jesus knows enough of her story to draw attention to her example. There she is, donating her last two mites like a kidney, releasing them with a cold plunk into the box.

The simplest interpretation is probably correct: giving has a proportional dimension. From those who have much, much is expected. Yet there's more going on in the story. Jesus is drawing attention to the widow's sacrificial action. The prudent thing would have been to hang on to those *lepta*, perhaps spend them like the widow at Zarephath in the time of Elisha, purchasing a handful of flour and a few drops of oil to pat out one more meal for herself and her son. Survive. Yet the widow in Jesus' day chooses a different path. She gives all she has to live on—literally, “her whole life”—to God.

This passage can rub us a little wrong. Middle-class American values instruct us to ladle out life in careful moderation, in frugal dribs and phylactic drabs. We maintain control. This is the logic we use to cast stones at the poor, who are forever making what we regard as dreadful spending decisions and giving us ample criteria to judge and reject them. By this standard, the widow's decision is questionable: she fritters away her last means of support. Yet what catches Jesus' attention is not her lack of retirement-planning savvy. Jesus is impressed by her commitment to give “her whole life to God.” At a critical juncture, the widow chooses sacrifice over survival.

It should come as no surprise that Jesus highlights the widow's example. Jesus is forever calling people to give their whole lives to God. It's central to his vision of discipleship. Put your hand to the plow and don't turn back. Leave family. Leave friends. Take up your cross and follow me. Even Elisha of old was allowed to turn back from his plow, roast the oxen, and attend his own farewell party (1 Kings 19:20-21). But Jesus' cruciform calling comes in at an even higher discipleship register than Elijah's call of Elisha. It's a sacrifice.

Sacrifice can throw us off balance, and yet there's something deeply human about it. We long to give ourselves away. But to whom? And how? There are many options out there—as Paul says, “many gods and many lords” eager to receive our lives in sacrifice (1 Cor. 8:5). Of course, those gods and lords are fanged, hunched, and caked in shadows. Anything less than the God of the universe, the one who paradoxically has “no delight in sacrifice,” will only gobble us up (Psalm 51:16). And our sacrificial GPS is gunked up, pointing us to sacrifice the wrong things at the wrong times.

The widow gets it right somehow. Her act is a teachable moment, a living parable. She gives her whole life to God. Go and do likewise.

We can't give our whole lives to God, however, if we don't trust God like the widow does. She takes a step of faith, choosing to believe in God's identity as the "protector of widows" (Ps. 68:5). She also exercises trust in the community of faith. She puts her money where Israel's mouth is, choosing to believe that the people will step up to the writ of the law and provide for those among them who "have no allotment or inheritance" (Deut. 14:28-29).

It's counterintuitive, but sacrifice affirms agency. Rather than being driven by circumstances into a meager survival, the widow chooses to make an extravagant gift. Whatever the abuses of the temple hierarchy, this is her sacrifice, freely given to God. We too have something at our disposal—time, money, strength, our whole lives. What or who are you willing to sacrifice for?

Paint that on a rock and hide it under a tree.