

The widow's mite



Mark 12:8-44; Luke 21:1-4

Year B Proper 27

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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1	2	3
▲	Matthew - a former tax collector (i.e. a agent of the Roman occupation of his own people) who in his repentance from that past life is the most religiously fervent of the disciples	▲		▲
▲	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)	▲		▲
▲	Joanna - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus	●	▲	
▲	Jesus	▲		▲
▲	Widow - a poor widow		▲	
▲	Priest - one of the temple priests		▲	

Scene 1

James , Jesus , Joanna , Matthew

{Jesus sits in front of the temple donation box with some of his disciples.}

Matthew This is my favorite place in the Temple!

James *[cynically]* I'll bet! They're ripping off the people just like you used to. I'll bet you would have given your right arm to have a scam as good as this one is!

Matthew *[meekly]* I like it now because of the thought of all that money going to God.

Joanna I thought you believed the whole system to be corrupt.

Matthew I do. But these people don't know any better. They're sincerely giving to the highest goal they know of. And not everybody in the system is corrupt.

Joanna I personally know some pretty honest teachers here.

Jesus *[a sudden outburst]* Beware the teachers of the law! They like walking around in flowing robes and being greeted in the marketplaces, and having the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets, but they devour widows'™ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely!

James *[gloating to Joanna]* So much for your "honest" teachers!

Joanna *[in a low voice]* They're not all like that.

Matthew But enough of them are to make the difference. If only these people knew! Some day, we'll give them something more worthy of their contributions.

Jesus *[grimly]* Let us hope that *they* will be worthy of what we bring them.

James *[suddenly excited]* Whoa! Did you see that guy? He's definitely worthy.

Matthew What guy? What happened?

James See that guy in the blue with the empty bag in his hand? I swear it was filled with silver pieces - and he dumped the whole lot in!

Joanna *[dryly]* Yes, he made it very easy to see how much was in the bag.

Matthew Still, it was a pretty big donation.

Jesus Exactly how big, would you estimate?

Matthew Well...a bag that size might hold fifty local silvers, but that guy's Sidonese. Their coins are slightly bigger, and somewhat less pure, so they spend them when they can so they only need to carry around the more efficient currencies. So let's assume 40 Sidonese pieces: total value...about \$8000! That's a pretty big chunk, even for a wealthy Sidonese merchant who probably only comes into the Temple a few times a year.

Joanna How do you know that's what he is?

Matthew See his bag of samples? He's a cloth merchant. And he's got plenty of purple and blue, not to mention what he's wearing. So he's a pretty top level merchant. I'd guess his annual income is about

\$100k. So \$8k is a pretty big percentage for a single anonymous gift.

Jesus Not entirely anonymous.

Matthew No, it's true, he made a big show of it. But still, he didn't have to use the box. He could have donated under his own name and gotten more praise and preferential treatment out of it.

James *[in disgust]* Pah! I hope worms eat his precious cloth!

Joanna *[to Matthew, after a pause]* What makes you so sure about his profession and his income, anyway?

Matthew *[modestly]* It used to be my business.

Joanna Guessing the jobs and incomes of...? *[suddenly realizing]* Oh!

Jesus *[gently]* It was useful to know your mark ahead of time, wasn't it?

Matthew *[sheepishly]* Yeah. If I saw a guy like him, I'd try to head him off before he got here, and I'd tell him he couldn't donate in Sidonese silvers, but that I could trade him local currency for them.

James At a very reasonable exchange rate of course!

Matthew Like the moneychangers, only worse!

Joanna I'm glad you're on our side now.

Jesus Speaking of our side... *[to Matthew]* What do you make of her?

Matthew Who? That woman?

Jesus Yes.

Matthew That beggar woman?

Jesus Yes.

Matthew Well, she doesn't exactly fall into my past area of expertise, but it's obvious she's worth about two cents!

Joanna Look! She's donating!

James Were those silver pieces? How does a woman like that get silver pieces?

Matthew No, they were copper.

Jesus Estimated value?

Matthew Two cents.

Jesus *[in a teacherly voice]* Tell me, each of you, who gave the most, that woman or the Sidonese merchant?

James Well, it's obvious.

Jesus *[coyly]* Is it?

James Sure. The woman.

Jesus *[a little disappointed]* Uh, right. But why?

James She gave a bigger percentage of what she had.

Joanna If Matthew was right, 100%!

Matthew If anything, I wouldn't be surprised if it was effectively more than 100%. I wouldn't be surprised if she had nothing to begin with, but some passerby gave her the coins. And she turned right around and gave them to God!

James Good lesson, rabbi!

Jesus *[still a little disappointed]* Uh, thanks. You were all good hearers of that one.

Scene 2

Joanna , Priest , Widow

{Joanna goes over to commend the poor widow.}

Joanna Excuse me.

Widow *[automatically in begging mode]* A penny for a poor old widow?

Joanna Oh. Of course. Uh, here.

Widow Thank you! God bless you!

Joanna You're very welcome. *[after a pause]* Uh, I just came over to say I thought what you did was wonderful.

Widow What did I do?

Joanna You put what was probably all you had into the donation box.

Widow *[dismissively]* Oh, that! I always do that. I give the first gift that anyone gives me each day back to God.

Joanna Wow. That's amazing.

Widow It's only the first fruits, as God commands. I just wish I could come give it after sundown.

Joanna What do you mean?

Widow Well, I do all my begging at a good corner I know near the marketplace, but not too near as to run into all the other beggars. But it's a long walk from there to here and back again. If the donation box remained open after sundown, I could spend all of the day begging when there's the most traffic, and then come here afterward to give the first gift I got.

Joanna That makes sense. *[after a pause]* How about this? Let's grab one of the priests and make a request.

Widow They'd never listen to *us*!

Joanna Actually, if I told them who I was, they'd probably listen to *me*, but I firmly believe that they ought to pay more attention to *you*, who give them, every day, more money than I ever did.

Widow *[in a worried voice]* I don't know...

Joanna *[brightly, spotting a priest]* Excuse me! Sir? Could we ask you something?

Priest Of course.

Joanna We've noticed that the box is only accessible during the day, but a lot of people might be too busy to get here during their...working hours. Would it be possible to keep the box open...one extra hour each day? *[to the widow]* Would that do it?

Widow Yes! That would make all the difference.

Priest *[politely]* That's a very good suggestion. I'll pass it on to our schedulers.

Widow *[gratefully]* Thank you! God bless you!

{The priest begins to walk away.}

Joanna *[firmly to the priest]* Hold on! You're not passing it on to anybody, are you?

Priest Of course I am! But that doesn't mean it will be accepted. *[officially]* We receive many suggestions from the general public, and we do our best to serve you all. But we can't do everything anybody asks for.

Joanna *[challenging him]* Last winter, you changed the time of your late synagogue service to accomodate a certain big donor who liked to get home before sunset.

Priest *[getting defensive]* That change benefitted *many* of our worshipers, especially the elderly and infirm.

Joanna Then you should have made it years ago. You only made it last winter when Baruch ben Ezra, who donated five gold urns to the Temple, began complaining!

Priest *[stunned]* How did you know...? *[suspiciously]* Who are you?

Joanna *[fervently]* Who *I* am doesn't matter. Who this poor widow is, should!

Priest *[with trepidation, fearing the widow is actually some powerful person]* Who are you? I...I'm sorry, but I didn't recognize you.

Widow *[in shocked humility]* Me? I'm nobody!

Joanna *[firmly]* She's your biggest donor!

Priest What? But...who are you?

Widow *[in genuine confusion]* I don't know what she's talking about. I'm just a old woman.

Joanna Just today, this woman put two copper pieces into the donation box. That was all the money she possessed! 100% of her net worth! Do you have any other donors who even come close?

Priest *[angrily]* Two coppers? Two coppers? Listen, lady! *[pauses and calms himself down, continuing with strained patience]* Listen, we appreciate every gift we're given, especially those that represent a tremendous sacrifice for those to give them. But we can't go changing the donation box schedule at the whim of...of any one person, no matter how much she's given of what she has.

Joanna But you can change the worship schedule at the whim of a man who only gave a fraction of what she did?

Priest *[almost exploding in anger again]* He didn't...! *[calming himself down again]* Okay, I see your point. All I can do is pass on the suggestion. And I will! I promise. Okay?

Scene 3

James , Jesus , Matthew

{Meanwhile, back at the house, Jesus chats with James and Matthew.}

Jesus James, Matthew, how would you judge our housing situation this week?

Matthew Well, it's nice to be in a real house, but it sure is crowded!

James Have you found another homeowner willing to take some of us in? That would really help.

Jesus What would you say if I told you that we've been approached by two people asking for temporary shelter?

Matthew I'd say, "God help us all!"

James *[sternly]* Rabbi, I hope you didn't promise these people beds. You should really check with us first!

Jesus What if I told you that I only promised them one bed? That we could take just one of them?

Matthew *[humorously]* I guess that would be a little less impossible!

James *[resignedly]* Okay, just let me know who the lucky winner is, and I'll make the arrangements.

Jesus What if I asked you to make the choice?

Matthew The two of us? Me and James?

Jesus Yes.

James Okay, you can count on us!

Jesus Very good. So here it is: Who would you choose to be your housemate for the next week, between the two people we saw at the donation box today, the wealthy merchant and the poor widow?

Matthew What? Did they both really ask for shelter?

James The widow's already homeless, so what difference will one week under a roof make to her?

Jesus So your vote would be for the merchant?

James Yeah. I know we said the widow gave more to God, but the merchant needs this more. And maybe if he appreciates our help, he'll give even more to God - by giving something to *us*!

Jesus What would your vote be, Matthew? You're always reminding us that our mission must primarily be a spiritual one, so does that mean you'd take the widow?

Matthew *[after a thoughtful pause, in a suspicious voice]* You know, you keep saying, "would." "What if I told you..." and "What would you vote..." And it sure would be a big coincidence that those two particular people that we saw at the box came to us to request shelter. Did they really, or is all this just a hypothetical situation?

Jesus *[after a pause]* Okay, you got me! It's all hypothetical. I wanted you to see that, though it was easy to favor the widow theoretically, it would be a lot harder in real life. Declaring that she gave the bigger gift was one thing, but it might be another thing entirely to choose her to come live with us in that small house for a week!

James *[with good humor]* Okay, you got *us*! We got it wrong. We're bums. We're dummies. We're callow uncaring dolts.

Matthew Wait, I never did answer the question, so it's not "we" yet. I vote for the widow!

*You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
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