

LENT IN PLAIN SIGHT: TWO COPPER COINS

Luke 21:1-4

March 20, 2022

What if I told you that this story was not primarily an object lesson in financial generosity? If you've heard this story preached before, there's a high likelihood that this is the message you've received. I've heard the text approached that way. I've even preached this text that way. I get it. It's the ultimate text for that season of the church year when we are explicitly asking for pledges and contributions. We point to the widow who gave all she had to support the ministries of the temple. We canonize her for this extraordinary act. And, with some subtlety, we shame those who, in Jesus' words, "give out of their abundance," suggesting that somehow those contributions are less meaningful or worthy of praise. It's stewardship sermon 101.

Except, not really. The truth, I think, is that this story in the Gospel of Luke is somehow simpler and more profound than those messages suggest. The words of Jesus are less about giving sacrificially than they are about living intentionally. While the contribution of the widow is indeed extraordinary, I'm not sure we would want to make a model out of it. Should not the marginalized and the impoverished be supported by the religious community? What kind of institution asks the poor to give their last pennies?

Let me suggest another approach. First, let's set the scene. The temple was a hive of activity as Jesus and his disciples arrived. People were coming and going in every direction. It must have been quite a scene to witness by these rural fishermen in the holy city of Jerusalem for the first time. Most recognizable among those coming and going were the scribes. They were the religious leaders. They stood out for their long and flowing robes, their loud prayers spoken with elaborate language, their prominent

places in the temple. Equally recognizable were the wealthy folk. You could tell them by their expensive clothing and by that air of confidence that comes from bringing the best sacrifices to God.

No one saw *her*. She slipped in. She dropped her meager gift of copper coins into the box with a clang, and she made for the exit as quickly as she came. No fanfare. Certainly no expectation of recognition. She was invisible in the temple, as she was everywhere else—a widow who lacked both the stature of the scribes and the resources of the wealthy. No one watched her, but then again, she was used to that. No one knew that what she brought to the temple that day was everything she had to offer.

No one noticed her. But Jesus did. He saw the rich making their gifts, *and* he saw her. And she's the one he points out to his disciples. Look at her. Notice her. Acknowledge her.

As we explore the season of Lent in plain sight, it's worth our time this morning to consider what we see. *What do you notice?* In the hectic frenzy of your days and the ordinary acts of your lives, what attracts your attention? What do you see? Where are your eyes naturally drawn? And, perhaps more to the point this Sunday, what do you miss? Whom do you ignore? From which places and people do we avert our attention...and why?

I'd suggest that this story is all about awareness, all about vision, all about seeing. No one noticed her. But Jesus did. Why? Why did Jesus notice her?

The easy answer here is that he is Jesus. His awareness is divine, impeccably so. He has super vision. He sees, quite literally, with the eyes of God, the eyes

of God that look not at outward appearance, not at long robes or elaborate sacrifices, but look at the heart. Sees the beauty. Recognizes the tenderness of this extreme act of generosity. Sees it from the inside. And no doubt that part is true. But there is something else going on here as well. Remember, Jesus has just come to Jerusalem. He did so riding on a donkey. For months and months now, he has been telling his disciples what will happen in Jerusalem. Things are not going to go well for him. Betrayal. Denial. Arrest. Trial. Verdict. Sentencing. The religious and political establishment will unite in turning furiously against him. Jesus has tried to warn his disciples, and his disciples have tried at every turn to avoid it. They've changed the subject. They've ignored the warnings. They have even chastised him for bringing it up. "Jesus, that can't be true."

But it is true. Jesus knows this is his last week. In four days, he will be dead. In the temple, he sees a woman, the widow, giving all she's got to an institution filled with fault and corruption. He recognizes someone in her. He is on his way to the cross.

She has given all she has. So will he.

And so, Jesus points to a poor widow and her meager gift of copper coins. *This is what I have been saying to you all along. Look at her. Notice her.*

Among his final lessons to the disciples, Jesus aims to deepen their awareness. He's trying to adjust their eyesight, to train their hearts to notice what they so easily miss.

When did I see you, Lord? When was it that I saw you? When were you standing right in front of me, and I missed you completely?

You were there. You were there in the guise of the stranger, the widow, the prisoner, the persecuted. You were there. You were there in the eyes of a hungry child, a dispirited neighbor, a hopeless refugee, a hurting friend. You were there. When did I miss you? You were there. You are here. And what did I see? I saw a distraction. I saw a disruption. I saw

a disturbance. You were an obstacle to be overcome. You were an inconvenience to be ignored. I walked right by you. You walked right past me, and I was looking somewhere else. When did I see you?

But, what if we see him? What if we notice her? What if the disciples turn their attention to track the widow and her mighty deed? What if those scribes in their long flowing robes and the wealthy patrons of the temple stopped to see the poor woman release her final two pennies? It was almost nothing. It was literally everything. What if they saw her? What if they saw her not as an object lesson in generosity? What if they saw her not as an abstract metaphor, not as a touching story? What if they saw her as a human being whose life was bound up with theirs?

That's the thing about awareness. If you have seen, you can't be still. If you have heard, you can't be silent. Once you have witnessed—truly witnessed—this kind of sacrifice, you will be changed by it. If you choose to see, to notice.

And that's what happened to the disciples. Not all at once right here, but gradually. Over time, the community they formed in Jesus' name was centered on seeing what others do not, will not, see. In time, they opened their eyes and their hearts to the overlooked and the ignored. And that became their passion. Their commitment to the marginalized and the unseen would define their lives. It starts with awareness.

It can start there for us. I find that I am having lots of conversations these days that begin like this: *How did we get here?* So deeply divided and distrustful of one another. How did we get here? So easily angered. So constantly frustrated. A slow boil that threatens to overtake us at any moment. How did we get here? How did our institutions become so deeply frayed and our relationships so painfully strained? In many of my conversations these days, we're asking that question, not in the abstract, but in our own lives. How did we get here? I'll confess to a kind of optimism that can border on naivete, but I have this persistent sense of a growing recognition that

the way we're living is dysfunctional for all of us. We feel trapped. I truly believe that not one of us wants to live in fear and distrust, or anger and disgust. But collectively we've dug such a deep hole that it's easier to just keep digging.

Awareness offers us a way out, for the heart's eyes see a different path.

Last Sunday afternoon, I was driving our son Samuel to a party celebrating the end of our basketball season. I probably left the radio on a little too long, and as can sometimes happen with Sam, the conversation turned to current events. He asked if the EU had allowed Ukraine to join them yet, and I said no. He wanted an explanation of that, and I did the best I could. But I confess it was totally unsatisfying to the eight-year-old sense of justice, and frankly I couldn't argue with his rationale. Sam was silent for a moment, but then just as we were turning into the parking lot, he took another tack.

Dad, I know that Putin is trying to take over other countries so he can have all the power. But maybe if he could just see what it's like for people in Ukraine he would change his mind about that. Like, how about this: Maybe he could switch places with them for one week. Yep, that would do it, I think.

I know. Far too simplistic. Childish delusions. The dreams of a heart not yet conversant with complex geopolitical realities or the depravity of the human mind.

But I haven't been able to stop thinking about Sam's idea. I haven't been able to stop wondering: What if we could see each other? Not in abstract theory or soaring metaphor, but human to human.

George Saunders is a writer of extraordinary grace. Over the years, I've returned often to the commencement speech he gave at Syracuse University in the spring of 2013. The speech is framed around the topic of regret, not a common theme of commencement speeches. In that spirit, Saunders tells this story.

When he was in seventh grade, a new student moved to the town where he lived and came to his school. The student, he calls her Ellen, was small and shy. She wore cat eye glasses. When she was nervous, she had the habit of taking a strand of her hair and chewing on it. Saunders remembers how Ellen was ignored, ridiculed, and teased by other students. He writes, "I could see how it hurt her. I still remember the way she'd look after an insult: eyes cast down, a little gut-kicked, as if, having been reminded of her place, she was trying to disappear. After a while, she'd drift away, hair-strand still in her mouth." Saunders imagines Ellen going home after school, and her mother asks, "How was your day, Sweetie?" Mustering her courage and painting a smile, Ellen replies, "Oh, Mom, it was just fine."

Then, Ellen's family moved away. That was it. That's the end of story. Except, forty-two years later, Saunders still remembers it. He still thinks about it. It still bothers him. Here's how he concludes. "So here's something I know to be true, although it's a little corny, and I don't quite know what to do with it: What I regret most in my life are failures of kindness."

Friends, we are suffering from a collective failure of kindness. Having dug this deep, we just keep digging. Casting disembodied dispatches, enabled by online interaction that separate us from the receivers of our words, the consequences of our rhetoric—just as the religious and the rich tossed their cash into the plate, all the while ignoring the widow in their literal midst. No one saw her. This detachment of our actions and their impact has extended to interpersonal encounter in troubling ways. Somehow, we've ceased to look for the good in the other, to seek understanding, to pursue common purpose. Kindness is a costly casualty of seeing the world and our neighbors in this way. Friends, we are failing.

What if we could see differently? Jesus implores his followers. *Look at this widow who gives everything. Look at her, and you will see me. Look at her, and you*

will see the costly way of the cross. Look at her, and you will no longer be still or silent.

Look at each other. You will see Jesus. You know by now that I think Marilynne Robinson always has the right words. Listen to these: “Who might he not be? He told us who he was—the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned, the stranger. For Christians the incarnation changed the world in one great particular. We know what we do, whom we slight, insult, ignore, forget. The parable that is our faith would tell us that [he] is always real, always present, waiting to be seen.”

From the bottom of my heart, I believe we can be witnesses to a way out. It starts when we see him, when we see each other.

No one noticed her. But Jesus did. Will you?