

# Mark 12:38–44

*James Nestingen · CROSS Talk*

Taught for the Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary) ·  
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Going by the texts for Pentecost 24, this Sunday ought to be called Widow Sunday. We have one of the tough old widows of the Old Testament showing up in 1 Kings, the widow of Zarephath. This is a woman as hard as any woman you ever met: snapping her gum, with her hair back in a net, glowering at you. She's tough. And then Psalm 146 goes right with it, commending the widows to our attention. There is plenty in the New Testament too, given the prominence of widows, for instance in the book of Acts or in Paul's congregation in Rome; we could find a text there about widows. But of course we're following Hebrews now, and we have a very important text from Hebrews dealing with the whole sacrificial system, which could absorb practically all our attention, because it is so dramatically important and indicates a decisive shift that came with the New Testament.

But then we're back to the widows again in the gospel. Here is one of the great old women of the New Testament. I just love her: the widow's mite. That's all we know about her, that mite that went into the offering plate. But this is one reckless old lady, boy, who's not going to be denied. She'll throw it all away at a moment's notice, and here we go. So Jesus is protecting this dear woman from herself, and of course from the temple development officers who are right there shaking her till the last penny falls out.

So we'll have to get acquainted with all these widows. We hear over and over again in the Old Testament that the good Lord loves widows, because they are among the most vulnerable and exposed. It may be slightly better now with Social Security, as long as we've still got it, but the widows get special attention from God. They are the apple of his eye. He is always watching out for them, because of course, being vulnerable, they are easily exploited. So we'll work our way through these texts and have some fun.

## The Widow of Zarephath: 1 Kings 17

First of all, we'll go and meet the widow of Zarephath. This is a woman who has been around, used hard and put away wet, as we say in the Midwest. She knows a thing or two about the nature of public life, and she also knows a thing or two about the religious. So she has resigned herself. She figures this drought is going to be the end of her and her child. She has stored up a little meal and a little oil, and she is going to do some baking, and then they are just going to lie down and die, because that is about the only alternative the two of them have.

When Elijah enters the picture, he enters it exploitatively. There is something about this that's just not right. Here is a hard, maybe crass, hard-bitten woman who has fended her way through life. She is a widow. She has at least one child to take care of, who shows up in the text. She is on her own, and she needs all she's got. And here comes Elijah to help himself.

Widows are familiar with this, of course. They get brought into the sights of all kinds of development officers and pastors and people with plans who need a little funding, and so on and so forth. She's not surprised when Elijah moves in and wants to help himself. That's par for the course in her experience. You get the preacher at the table, and he's going to start looking for fried chicken just as sure as you know, and use the boardinghouse reach to get thirds and fourths too, if it's me or my brother or anybody else like us. We need to be fed, no matter what this poor widow and her child are having to face.

But you know that the good Lord loves to work under the sign of the opposite. Where there is love and joy, he shows a sign of wrath and hatred. So here we have a sign of exploitation, and a fairly predictable one. Widows the world over, having no protection and being a bit of a burden to their families often enough, have nowhere to turn, and so they are vulnerable, and the authorities start feeling around for their purses and whatever else they can find. That's how it works. It's awful.

So we have a sign of exploitation, for sure. But under the sign of exploitation, grace breaks out, and it breaks out in abundance. "The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth." Elijah has been sent to this hard-boiled woman, this woman who lives with her elbows up, who is a little on the defensive, who has been used and exploited. He has been sent to her because the good Lord has a taste for this kind. He likes them. And so in the midst of a drought brought on by Jezebel, Elijah is sent to this woman with an unfailing jar of meal and an unfailing jug of oil. There is going to be

enough, and more than enough, because the good Lord cares for the widows. “She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.” There you go. He has an investment in this woman, and having invested in her, he provides for her through this terrible drought.

## **Put Not Your Trust in Princes: Psalm 146**

When we come to Psalm 146, God’s concern for the widow and the orphan turns into a mandate. “Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul! I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long. Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.”

Now, who doesn’t believe in the inspiration of Scripture? If that’s not a perfect verse for today, Election Day, holy smokes! I awakened in terror, put my head under the covers, and wondered, “Do I have to get up? Do I really have to?” “Put not your trust in princes.” My temptation is not trust; it’s absolute cynicism and despair. How long has it been since you saw a politician you could really respect? Really? Well, I know some I respect a little. But put not your trust in them. That’s the good Lord himself, who is jealous. It is because we put so much trust in these people that there is so much hatred and vitriol. We are expecting things of sinners that we have no right to expect, things only the good Lord can produce, the way those guys think they are going to.

“Trust me,” he says. “I’ll feed you, just as I fed that widow at Zarephath.” He likes to create out of nothing, raise the dead, forgive sinners. He delights in making all things new. He is reliable. Politicians can barely pay their bills. We’ll hear the appeals now, of course. They have spent all this money and borrowed all this money, and now they are going to come around with their hands out, asking us to pay for what we endured watching TV or listening to the radio, innocent and hapless as we are. The oligarchs have put on their little show, and now they expect us to foot the bill. Well, good luck. Put not your trust in princes.

But now look at this. He pushes off the princes, and here is what he says about them: “When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.” Even when they have been trumpeting their influence and their dramatic control of the future. There’s not a politician born who doesn’t want to talk about creating a new future for us. Well, after all that they are in the grave. After all that they are food for the worms. After all that there is

nothing left. Not even their ideas survive, with their golden tones and their beautiful reflections. It's all over.

"Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever." Well, a politician is doing pretty well if he keeps his promises for a week, or if she makes it till the next day. That's the nature of that bunch. But God keeps his promises forever. He is utterly reliable, and this is how we know how reliable he is: he made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them. "Who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow." Here we go again: the most vulnerable in a patriarchal society. He has himself invested up to the neck. "But the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations."

I suppose I've told you this before, but you know that I live just two miles off one of the major highways between the Willamette Valley and the coast. We're about thirty-two miles from the Pacific, so we get lots of people going out there for the weekend. But there is about a twenty-five percent addition now, because there's a casino fifteen or twenty miles west of us. So in the morning and the evening we see the buses full of widows. They pick up all the widows they can muster in Portland and drive them down here, seventy-five miles away, and these nice ladies sit politely in rows with their purses on their laps, firmly clutched, as you understand, because they know they are going to come home with less, but they have a dream of coming home with more. Many of these ladies, it turns out, wear diapers, because they don't like to leave the machines once they get started. They are just convinced that the next quarter, the next dollar, is going to be their fortune, so they wear diapers so they don't have to leave, and they'll sit there and soil themselves right in the seat, because they are still convinced the next nickel is the one.

Tim Lundeen, you told me the story about how they found greenbacks that had been in people's mattresses coming in to the casino up north. This is just exploitation. Widows are ripe for it. They are not the only ones who get exploited by casinos, but they are the majority. The biggest percentage of gamblers, from what I've read, are women between the ages of sixty-seven and seventy-one. That's horrible. And the church is no better, as we'll see when we come to the gospel.

## Once for All: Hebrews 9

But we still have another lesson to go, and this one is a beauty. It has nothing to do with widows. In Hebrews 9 the author of Hebrews is flexing his theological muscle. You can wonder about him sometimes; he flirts with free-will stuff when he starts talking about the lost, and I get real nervous about it. But when he comes to these chapters, he is right in the groove. He's throwing the hard ones right down the middle, or one of those sliders that drops off right by your knees. It's just fabulous.

What he is dealing with is the sacrificial system of Israel. You know, of course, that Israel practiced the cult of sacrifice. Golgotha, where Jesus was crucified, was the place where the temple offal was dumped, where they set out the steaming gut piles from the animals sacrificed in the temple. It was maximally unclean, a place of death and of awful terror. And this place existed because the temple service was the sacrificial service. That's why all those sheep and lambs and doves and other birds and all the rest were available in the temple when Jesus came to drive out the money changers. It was a livestock show, and the livestock entered on four legs and left dead, because they had been offered as sacrifices.

There are some fundamental problems with the language of sacrifice. For one thing, it is all law-driven. The law takes the place of the gospel. The law sets the terms, and it is very important that those terms be eternal and nonnegotiable, because sacrifice is said to appease the law, to release from the accusation of the law, to propitiate or satisfy, and so to take away the wrath of God. So the law becomes eternal, and the gospel becomes temporal. The law determines all the standards, and Jesus sacrifices himself to the law, to God, to keep God from blowing his lid. He offers himself to God to placate him, to atone under the law and so satisfy its demands, so that God can befriend us.

You remember, of course, how much Gerhard Forde disliked this whole setup. He is not the only one. There is a long history of critique of legal systems, sacrificial systems, and in that long list Hebrews stands right at the front of the line. The author of Hebrews is a faithful Jew who had bought into the sacrificial system up to his neck, but he sees that something fundamentally different has happened in Christ Jesus. Christ Jesus is a divine shot of lightning that blew the fuses on the sacrificial system. And so, as we begin this text, the author of Hebrews is drawing some of the consequences of Jesus' death and resurrection for the sacrificial system.

“For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.” That’s the key phrase: he appears on our behalf. He is interceding for us. He is coming for us. “Nor was it to offer himself again and again.” This does not happen over and over again. It happens once. “As the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own,” to appease, to placate, to satisfy. “For then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world.” He has done it only once, and that ephapax, that once for all, has eliminated the need for any further sacrifice. He does not have to suffer repeatedly. He has suffered once. He has given himself for you, taking on the accusations that could rightfully be lodged against you, and he has been slaughtered by them. And we, you and I, have been his slaughterers. We went after him because we said, “I want to do this myself,” and so we put him away.

“But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.” The other day in our devotions Carolyn and I were reading a wonderful psalm that is an attack on the sacrificial system: “Do I eat the flesh of bulls?” Do you think I’m hungry for bulls? Is that why you keep offering me bulls? Get a life. I have better things to do with my time than listen to your song and dance and your goosebumps over your sacrificial animals. Cut it out. I’m in charge here. I’ll do what I need to do.

And so Jesus is putting an end to the sacrificial system. “And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.” He died. He took upon himself all our sins, all the accusations, everything that could be held against us. He piled it up on his back, and the load crushed him. He went down. He sacrificed himself for us. That’s the ticket here. He is not sacrificing himself to God. He is God in Christ, reconciling himself to us. He is dying for us. And so this is just a gorgeous text.

Sacrifice is like a whipped pup. It hangs around the edge of the church’s witness all the time, trying to sneak in and take over. You can hear it in the Lord’s Supper, for instance. Every time there’s a new hymnal, a new sacrificial slant is given to the sacrament, as if we needed that back again, as if that’s going to renew us, for crying in the night. It’s as old as the hills. That’s the old Adam’s religion: somehow, if I just give something to God, he is going to be impressed with me and back off. I’m in charge here, with all my sacrifices, and God will sit and wait.

Gerhard Ebeling has a great line in one of his essays: sacrifice imagines that God is passive, that he is just waiting for us to give up something precious to us. How ridiculous! He sacrifices for us, not the other way around, and that's the joy of it. So this is radical stuff in Hebrews. He is taking on the whole sacrificial system of Israel in a theologically informed and very helpful way. And when he takes on the sacrificial system, he blows it open, because the freedom of the gospel is right here.

Yes, I second Julie's comment: people just assume the sacrificial understanding. They think that's the only way to think, because of course that's the old Adam. The old Adam loves sacrifice, because then the old Adam is full of goosebumps and in awe of his own self-immolation: he is going to give himself to God, can you imagine? There's a great line from Karl Barth. He was at a Lutheran service somewhere, and they were loading up the sacrificial language, degenerate Lutheran stuff, you know how bad that gets, and Barth said, "If I were God, I'd say, 'Enough of that. I heard you once; now get on with it.'" There we go.

So this is the native stuff of human religion, and the author of Hebrews is right there to put it to death, as Christ Jesus puts the old Adam to death in us. The sacrifice now is not to him. The sacrifice now is to the neighbor, and he is real interested in that: "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Now get with it! Well, he doesn't say that. He says that by the time you wake up to what he has done, you will have been sacrificed, and your neighbor will be the beneficiary. That's fun. So there is freedom afoot here, boiling and spilling over, and that's really fun.

## **The Widow's Mite: Mark 12**

But we want to go back to our widows, these great ladies. You know them yourselves, hanging around congregations. We'd all be lost without the widows. They are the heart and soul of most parishes, and if you watch very long, you'll see that the widows are the ones who make things work. And Jesus just loves them. He is always looking out for them.

The widow's son at Nain, for example, is one of my all-time favorite stories. He comes upon a funeral procession. Isn't that something? I was once in the town of Nain, and I pretty near cried. I kept looking. Jiminy Christmas. They're bringing him out, and that widow is beside herself. She has lost her man, and now she has lost her son, and Jesus says, "Do not weep," the most unimaginable command for a two-time loser. And he says it because his next words are

going to be, “Young man, I say to you, rise!” He loves widows. So the first thing going on in this passage is that he is protecting this widow.

This is not a stewardship text. Goodness only knows the tragedy that has beset the church with the loss of good stewardship preaching. We need more of it, effective stewardship preaching, because we live in an age of conspicuous consumption, where people are much more interested in product relationships than in human relationships, and where we are barraged daily by a whole series of ads hawking product relationships as superior to marital or familial or political ones. Budweiser and all those advertisers: you are what you drink, according to those guys. Well, that’s nonsense, and somebody should stand up and say, “You are what you give away.” As Luther used to say, anything you have that is not used for the benefit of your neighbor is stolen. God gives you more than enough so that you have something left over to give to the neighbor. We need this kind of preaching.

But you all know bad stewardship preaching. This poor widow and her mite have been abused horribly by stewardship preachers. I was thinking this morning of one of my favorite stories about this. There was a great old pastor at First Lutheran in Fargo, who shall remain nameless, when I was in college in Moorhead, and he was one of those guys who could really crank it up on Stewardship Sunday, and this poor widow would be trotted out as the great example: we should all be like this widow. Well, one time, just after they had finished counting the money from the offering plates, robbers came into the room and stole the whole offering. So the next Sunday this pastor got into the pulpit and said, “This has been the worst week of my whole life. I have never suffered as I suffered this week. Now the whole town of Fargo knows just how little you people actually give. You should be like the widow.”

Well, the widow is not practicing good stewardship. Let’s be clear about that. She gives away everything, which means she has nothing left. And because she has nothing left, she is going to become dependent on somebody: maybe her sons, if she has any, or her daughters, but more likely the neighbors. Somebody is going to have to buy her lunch, because she has thrown all of it away. It’s irresponsible. God gives you more than enough so that you are provided for and can help others. But when you throw it all away, you are on your way to becoming dependent, and you can’t serve your neighbor when you haven’t got anything left. So this is bad stewardship, and that is just exactly Jesus’ point.

He comes to this right from a passage where he is speaking about exploitation by the religious leaders: “Beware of the scribes ... They devour widows’ houses.” And now we get an example

of it: this poor woman who doesn't know any better than to give away everything she has to the temple. Of course it has been dressed up in all kinds of piosity. The high priests and all the rest of them have been talking about how they need this money, if you'll just continue to contribute. They sound like public radio pledge week, for crying in the night, and it never ends either. So they convinced these poor people to give their money away, and so this woman goes and throws in her mite. She has been exploited.

So Jesus tells this story first of all to protect the woman. Use your common sense. You have more than you need, and the more than you need gives you an opportunity to be good to your neighbor, to the people who really need it, to be helpful to people. That's a great gift. On the other hand, God provides for you, so you keep what you need for your wife and children, or for your husband and children, and look after them faithfully. Either way, you have to be a responsible steward. So the first thing happening in this text is that Jesus is protecting us from the religious charlatans, not only the radio and television preachers, but from ourselves, the development agents and all the rest of us, who present the latest immortality project to the upwardly mobile and dream that they are going to finance it for us. We need protection from these people, and Jesus is providing it.

## **A Pair: the Widow and Her Lord**

But I think there is something more happening here, and I'm going to advertise it. Donald Juel and I used to be neighbors at Luther Seminary, before he went to Princeton. I just loved him. We sat there day after day in our adjoining offices, talking back and forth. It was just splendid. Don and I went back and forth on this text. He was pretty convinced that its first and only purpose is protection. But I think there is something more here, and I think Mark is aware of something more, and he has placed this story just exactly here for a reason.

All the way through the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' alternatives have been narrowing. He has been moving all the way toward Jerusalem, and moving toward Jerusalem, we know he is moving toward the cross and death. He is going to have to drink the cup, and that will be the end of him, at least in the eyes of history; in the eyes of God, his end is his beginning. The crucifixion is really the end of the story, as human stories are normally told, until God intervenes in the most marvelous way and rolls away the stone. But here Jesus is moving toward the end of the story. We're in the twelfth chapter of Mark. It's turning now. We'll get the little apocalypse in chapter 13, and then chapters 14 and 15 will be full of his death. The whole thing is ending.

Now here we have two people. We have this dear woman who is down to her last mite, her last penny. And we have Jesus, who is down to his last minutes, who knows that his arrest will follow, that torture will follow, that it's all over now, that his mission is being completed. We have these two joined right at this point.

Here's what I think. I don't like psychological interpretations of texts, and blah, blah, blah. But I think Jesus can see himself in this woman. There she is, joyously irresponsible, reckless, throwing herself away, wasting herself. And there he is, faithful to the end, but reckless in the extreme, going right into the face of death to defy it, to defeat it, to bring it to an end. So the narrative joins these two people right at the beginning of the Passion, because they have so very much in common.

And this dear woman, God bless her memory, jeepers, what a fabulous woman. She doesn't have a clue about protecting herself. She knows better. She has been used hard, just like the widow of Zarephath. She knows better. She's a widow. She's been around. She's seen the men knocking on her door at night and condemning her in the morning. She's seen people looking for her stuff. She's the one who lost the coin and looked all over for it. You know these people. She has practically nothing left but her faith. And so now, in reckless abandon, she throws herself down, just as Jesus is going to throw himself down in Jerusalem. It's going to be the end of him, until God raises him from the dead and vindicates him and creates all things new. Boy, what a pair: this old woman and her Lord standing side by side, winking at one another. He has his arm around her, and he says, "I'm going with you, lady. I'm going with you. There's nothing else left for either one of us."

So we are coming to the end of Pentecost now. Daylight saving time has ended, and the days are obviously shortening. At least it's light when we awaken, but it's dark quickly for most of us, at four-thirty or a quarter to five. By Thanksgiving the days will be down to practically a minimum, and then they'll shorten a few minutes a day until the twenty-first or twenty-second of December, when finally it starts to turn around. I always think about that a lot at the end of the Pentecost season, because we're coming to the end of the church year. But really this text brings us to the beginning. It brings us back to what is absolutely central: cross and resurrection, death and rising. Jesus is going into the maw of death, not like this poor woman, because oblivion now appears preferable, but to take death on, to twist Satan's nose, to gag Satan and force him to belch him out, so that the crucified Jesus is the risen one. And as the

risen one he comes to protect us, not only from the exploitation of daily life, but from the ultimate exploitation of death. Dying, we rise.

So we can't let seasonal depression have its way. Turn the lights on and let this text sing, because this woman is an old pal. She's been around the block. She's been used hard, just like the widow of Zarephath. She's like Thomas: "Let us also go, that we may die with him." There's nothing else to do but die. And dying, she rises, and so this story is still told, and told for obvious reasons: not so that we can admire her great stewardship, but because she is a friend of Jesus who threw herself away just as he was doing the same. They both became waste for you. That's the story. Everything is there. He was wasted on your behalf. She wasted herself because she didn't know any better alternative. What a pair; as good as it gets.

So I think this Sunday is a good opportunity to give thanks for the widows who are so helpful in congregations. I could start naming them by the dozen. Right after this we're going over to Salem to call on a widow from our congregation who is a dear friend. I promised her last night on the telephone that we'd be good, and she said, "What fun is that? Come on, we'll raise a little hell." There's a widow for you. That's great. These women have been right at the center of the church's life. And so God protects them with his tender care, just as he protects each of you. And so we give thanks.

God keep you this Sunday. We're coming to the end of the season, and we wish you God's peace and all the best. We'll talk to you next week.

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#### SOURCE

*CROSS Talk, a weekly Gospel text study for preachers led by Dr. James A. Nestingen, St. Paul Lutheran Seminary. Recorded 6 November 2012 (about 61 minutes).*

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PH3uQWqPVDg>

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