

**“Watching the Crowd”**  
**Mark 12:38-44**  
**The Rev. Caroline Sell**

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<sup>38</sup>As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, <sup>39</sup>and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! <sup>40</sup>They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

<sup>41</sup>He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. <sup>42</sup>A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. <sup>43</sup>Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. <sup>44</sup>For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

The Sermon

So - now that I’m a visitor at church most Sundays, I have the freedom to sit wherever I want. Typically, I’m a back right kind of gal, but recently when attending church one morning, my husband and I decided to sit in the balcony. That morning I remembered how much I love to sit in the balcony. In the balcony you notice things you simply cannot see from below, everything from the joyfully comical moments when someone starts to stand up at the wrong time and quickly sits back down hoping no one noticed to the woman who is embarrassed that she is unable to stand with everyone else and stares at the ground in frustration. In the balcony you see the big picture and you see the details all at once. And unlike sitting up on the chancel as a pastor, no one else is looking at you (except maybe the pastor).

Today we get to see what happens when Jesus sits in the balcony.

Today's story is of course a well-known story, a story about Jesus rebuking the scribes and lifting up the widow as a model for discipleship.

There are two different directions or interpretations most preachers will offer if you hear them preach on this story.

The first interpretation is that we desperately need to pay attention to the generosity of this woman. We need to note that she doesn't just give generously, she offers, as verse 44 says, everything she had, not too unlike how, just a few chapters later on the cross, Jesus will offer everything he has. Even in her poverty, this woman gives generously to God. It's our call to be like this woman, to give generously just like her. This interpretation sets up a perfect stewardship sermon and more than a few pastors have used it as such. Heck, I'm only in my fifth year of ordained ministry and I have already preached this text as part of stewardship.

The second interpretation that is often drawn from this text is to point out how Jesus is calling out the unjust temple systems and the leaders who perpetuate such systems. In this reading, the preacher highlights the scribes, drawing a comparison between the role that they would have played in the temple long ago, and the role that many of us, regular church goers, and especially leaders like me play today. It's our call to take an honest look in the mirror, because more times than we'd like to admit, it's us, the people who should know better, who are the ones perpetuating unjust systems, both in and out of the church.

These are certainly both faithful ways to take this story. And I suppose I should confess that not only have I already preached the first interpretation, but I've preached the second one too. Today, though, I want to lift up a third way.

So maybe (definitely) I've been spending too much time on Instagram in my recent Stay At Home Mom life change. But there are a lot of good resources on there, especially when it comes to the world of parenting. And as I prepared for this sermon, reading a story that I had read many times before, I couldn't help but think of Meredith Miller, a church educator with an Instagram platform, who is particularly interested in helping parents nurture faith in children. Meredith's foundation to her teaching, at least as I've understood it, is that we spend way too much time taking stories like these and reducing them into simple moralisms, especially when we teach the bible to children. Too often we turn the characters in the story into the heroes rather than remembering that Jesus is the hero. Jesus is the main character. Jesus is who we need to pay attention to first and foremost.

So with this on my mind, this time around I was paying a bit more attention to what Jesus is up to in this text than I had before.

And yes, of course, Jesus speaks in this text. So lifting up the woman, critiquing the scribes, you're listening to Jesus' words and therefore you are paying attention to Jesus. Certainly.

But Jesus is up to something else, too, in this story. Something that I had missed before.

Let me read verse 41 again.

v. 41 says - "Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury."

Jesus sat down and Jesus watched. He moved away, moved to the balcony - somewhere opposite or across, from the center of the room. Only then does he speak again, once he has noticed someone, the widow offering all that she had.

This is something we see Jesus doing throughout the gospels.

The examples alone, even in the Gospel of Mark, the fastest-paced of the gospels, are abundant:

Where does the Spirit drive Jesus after he's baptized in Mark 1? Far away - into the wilderness (Mark 1:12).

Just a few verses later, Jesus is busy preaching and healing in the Galilee. Then scripture says, one morning he gets up early and withdraws to a deserted place to pray (Mark 1:35).

Not long after, he will retreat from the crowds to spend the night on a boat in the middle of the sea with his close friends (Mark 2:7).

Again and again, we see Jesus engaging in ministry, and then stepping back, engaging again, and then stepping back away – sometimes he seeks out a ministry opportunity, other times they seek him out.

Either way, it is clear that Jesus values time in the balcony.

Biblical scholar Clifton Black describes Jesus' movement this way: "Mark is a gospel of contradictions. One observes a tension ... a peculiar push and pull between solitary distance and ominous proximity. As Jesus withdraws, others close in on him ... As Jesus approaches, others sometimes pull back or away from him."<sup>1</sup>

Talk with any youth minister who has been in the field for longer than – say – a few days – and they're sure to have picked up a copy of *Sustainable Youth Ministry* by Presbyterian pastor Mark DeVries. DeVries' book is packed with helpful tips for new youth pastors on everything from relationship building to fundraising. He talks about the high turnover in youth ministry, and he offers some suggestions on how to make it the long-haul. If you want to stay in the world of youth

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<sup>1</sup> Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, "Mark" by C. Clifton Black (Abingdon Press, 2011), 80.

ministry and avoid burn out, he says that you've got to practice "balcony time."

Balcony time, DeVries says is, an intentional block in your week where you turn off your phone, refuse to answer emails, and discipline yourself enough to NOT work on any of this week's to do list. Instead, you go to the (metaphorical) balcony, looking down at your ministry, paying attention, thinking about who has been missing, and, perhaps most important, wondering where God is at work now in your ministry, and where God might be leading your ministry next.

DeVries writes, "Far too many of us deal with our time like a five-year-old taking her hundred-pound dog for a walk. Driven by unpredictable, yelping demands, we feel incapable of doing anything to move our ministries any direction. Our work is reduced to erratic steps that takes us nowhere, each step a random replicate of the one before."<sup>2</sup>

These words may be directed to youth workers, specifically as they think about their ministries, but I think it applies to our lives, too. Because as I look around, I see a lot of people taking erratic steps to... who knows where, much of which is due to the sheer busyness of our lives. It hasn't taken long for many of my friends to lament that their calendars are filled to the brim again. As I visit churches, I'm noticing that church calendars are full – some probably even fuller than before. I can only imagine the Advent planning meetings, when so many church leaders feel an urge to make up for all of last year's missed Advent traditions. And lest you think this only applies to busy, younger, working folks, I know plenty of people who are retired, who's schedules are busier than ever!

The pandemic has been tough for so many of us in a variety of ways, but I bet if I spoke with some of you, you would hesitantly admit that there was some goodness in the way that life slowed down for you. Maybe

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<sup>2</sup> Sustainable Youth Ministry by Mark DeVries (Intervarsity Press; 2008), 131.

you were able to re-evaluate some of your values, remind yourself what was important to you, and as a result engage in the world with more intention. I remember toward the beginning of my time in quarantine, walking across the street and re-introducing myself to a neighbor who's name I had long forgotten. We enjoyed actually getting to know their family that Spring. I knew people who engaged in the 2020 election, working to register folks to vote or drive them to the polls, something they'd never had the time to do before. I know of loads of people who are incredibly proud of the technical skills they built up, learning how to use Zoom or Facebook Live, skills that they now have and can share with others.

When we spend time in the balcony, we slow down long enough to pay attention; to listen for God's voice; and to wonder where God is calling us next. This work changes us and it changes our world.

There is a story out of Princeton Seminary that has been told many times before, but I'm always glad to hear it again.

Way back in the 1970s Princeton University psychology students recruited 67 Princeton Seminary students to take part in "The Good Neighbor Experiment." The experiment was trying to determine what factors might influence us to help someone in distress. When the students showed up at their assigned time, they were asked to offer a reflection on the story of The Good Samaritan, the story that Jesus tells where a Jewish man is left half dead on the side of the road, two religious people walk on by, neglecting to stop to help. The one who stops to help is the Samaritan, the last listeners would have expected.

The Princeton seminary students were given a bit of time to prepare their reflection on this text, and then they were asked to go to another building across campus to offer this reflection.

One group of students were told that they were late to give the sermon and needed to hurry on over. Another group was told that they were

ready to be received, so they should go straight over. And a final group of students were told that they were a few minutes early, but that they could go on over and wait. Each student walked by themselves to the classroom across campus, and along the way they walked by a person who appeared in extreme distress.

The researchers assumed many students would stop to help – these were pastors in training in the middle of writing a sermon on the Good Samaritan, after all. And many did. And many did not. It turned out that the dominant factor in determining whether or not a student would stop - was time. While 63% of students in the low-hurry situation stopped to help, 45% in the intermediate hurry situation stopped, and shockingly low, only 10% of students in the high-hurry situation stopped.<sup>3</sup>

Time was the variable that was most likely to determine whether or not the students stopped to help.

Here's what the researchers said: "...This is often true of people in a hurry; they hurry because somebody depends on their being somewhere. Conflict, rather than callousness, can explain their failure to stop."<sup>4</sup>

Conflict, rather than callousness, can explain their failure to stop.

We're going to be rebuilding our churches, our cities, our country, our lives – for a long time. In fact, some are saying that this next decade will be marked by notable instability. We can't afford to be taking erratic steps to nowhere. The world needs people to step back. To pay attention.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.rightattitudes.com/2015/06/16/people-in-a-rush-are-less-likely-to-help-themselves/>

<sup>4</sup> "FROM JERUSALEM TO JERICHO": A STUDY OF SITUATIONAL AND DISPOSITIONAL VARIABLES IN HELPING BEHAVIOR, JOHN M. DARLEY AND C. DANIEL BATSON *Princeton University, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 1973, Vol. 27, No. 1, 100-108

To listen to one another. To remember the lessons that we learned in that year or year and a half when life slowed us down.

We need to get in the balcony. We need to get in the balcony if we're 32 years old with a two-year-old at home, or 75 with more time than ever on your hands, trying to figure out the most meaningful way to engage in a post-retirement phase of life. As followers of Jesus, we can take note that Jesus himself spent time in the balcony. That one day in the balcony he noticed a woman, a poor woman, a woman who had been neglected by the people who should have been taking care of her. Who knows how many people hurried by that woman that day? Who knows how many folks neglected to stop? But Jesus, he noticed her. And here we are 2000+ years later telling her story. I don't know how Jesus will speak to you in the balcony, who Jesus will invite you to pay attention to, or how he will ask you to spend your time. But I can say that I trust that time spent in the balcony is necessary and worth it.

Amen.

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November 7, 2021