

Mark 12:38-44

God Notices

This past week I had been given the opportunity to take daily walks at Crieff Hills, a beautiful place outside of Guelph. As I did so I tried to pay attention to what was around me. Lately it seems I have gone from one project to the next, one Sunday to the next, one sermon to the next, one question or concern to the next. It was time to stop take a look around, and breathe. So I went on walks and *noticed* the leaves rustling, the breeze as it moves past my ears, a squirrel scampering up a tree trunk and birds flitting about. One evening I stopped to listen as flocks of geese gathered noisily, honking their arrival in a valley as the evening sky reflected pinks, blues, and greys.

It was a time to *notice* the flavours and textures of my food as I savoured the daily meals provided, putting my fork down between tasty bites, taking a breath before another delightful fork or spoonful, giving thanks that I have been nourished, instead of quickly getting nutrition in me before I head to the next thing to plan, meeting to go to, or question to answer.

Taking time to notice.

Jesus took time to notice things too.

Throughout the Gospel of Mark Jesus has taken time to hear the questions and desires of others such as brothers James and John who queried about whether or not they could sit one at the left and the other at the right hand of Jesus in his glory. Jesus took time to heal a man at the side of the road who was blind and begging. And now, as he was teaching in the temple, Jesus noticed the scribes who were walking around in long robes, their clothing indicating that they had some prestige, and through their actions and expectations, could be seen wanting to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces. These men got the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets. Jesus noticed them and how they desired to be recognized for their high position. They drew attention to themselves. The scribes wanted to be noticed for how they looked and for their standing in the community. In the process they missed the ones they were called to notice.

Instead of helping the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger among them, Jesus says, "they were devouring widows' houses." In other words, rather than noticing the low standing of a widow who had no support and coming along side to be of help, to lift the widows up out of their poverty and pain, the scribes were happy to ignore that and in fact, take advantage of the women in their vulnerable state and circumstances. To make

it look better and maybe even make themselves feel better, they would say long prayers, these long prayers meant to appear as a sign of piety.

Jesus calls them on it saying, they will receive the greater condemnation or to say it another way, they will pay for it in the long run.

The scene moves from inside the temple to a position outside the treasury, a spot where one could watch as the crowd put money into the treasury for the temple. Now the fact there was a treasury was not in itself a bad thing; buildings take money, ministry takes resources both human and financial. And there is no historical indication that people felt that, what was referred to as the “temple tax,” was a burden or a problem. The problem lay in what Jesus observed about this particular woman, this widow, in contrast to the long flowing robed scribes.

Jesus watched as many rich people put in large sums of money. One way that a person could tell that someone gave large sums of money was the sound of coins as they dropped in and through the receptacle. It was built in such a way and with materials that the sound resonated. Remember, this is not a time of dollar bills, checks, or e-transfers. The effect was that one could literally hear when someone had put a lot of money in the treasury and would take notice. The sound of two small coins, as left by the widow would have brought no notice. Yet that small amount of money represented the woman’s whole life.

Over years this text has been preached as a way to tell people to be like the widow and give generously, holding her up of an example of faith. And that could be the way to go with this. We don’t know the woman’s motive for putting the money in the treasury rather than keeping it for her own need. It could be she felt compelled to give out of her faith, hoping that God would honour her offering with some blessing. Yet given the context in which Jesus takes notice, scholars are now giving this text another look, wondering whether it was more likely a statement on the need of a widow and the sheer disregard of those who knew the words of the Old Testament and did not move to help her in her time of need.

The book of Deuteronomy speaks multiple times to the responsibility of the community and particularly those in leadership in taking care of the widow, the orphan, or the stranger in their midst.¹ If the scribes had been paying attention, they may have noticed this woman, and rather than allowing her to give her last of everything, they may have instead made sure she had secure lodging and food to eat.

And isn’t this as it is today? We have a tendency to hold in high esteem those who have power, wealth, fame, fortune or prestige, those with fine clothing and millions of Instagram or Facebook followers. Given the choice of mingling with people of influence over mingling with those who are relieving themselves in a back alley, well it is pretty easy to guess where our hearts and minds would lead us. This story tells us that Jesus

¹ Deuteronomy 10:18, 14:28-29; 24:17; 27:19

noticed both those who paraded around looking for recognition and the one giving all that was her life.

God notices too. God notices a lot of things. God notices how we react to different people in our lives and notices our struggle. God sees who we come along side, and who we snub. And this is not a judgement, it is a call to pay attention. Who do we notice? Do we know and trust that God sees us in our challenges and in our desire to also hold some kind of power? Our desire to be control over things or people? These are human tendencies.

And yet, as follower of Christ we are held accountable for taking notice of the lives of those who have even less then ourselves. And yup, that is scary. We are afraid of people we don't know and even more so, people whose lives we can't get our minds wrapped around. But Jesus was all about justice and provision for those we would ignore, those who are taken advantage of, those who are ill, hungry, impoverished. and even those in prison.

As we sit in our sanctuaries, warm home, place of work or learning, it is easy to pretend we do not see those who are struggling. It is easier to turn away than to look into the face of one we don't understand and prefer to judge.

Jesus noticed the scribe, and Jesus noticed the widow. God notices even now and it is our turn to take notice.

I don't think I can say it better than pastor and teacher David Lose who wrote,

I think God is inviting us to look around and see each other, those in our community we know and those we don't. And I mean really see each other – the pain of those who are discriminated against because of their ethnicity, the desolation of those who cannot find work and have been abandoned to fend for themselves, the despair of those who have given up on finding work and have lost hope, the anguish of those who have been exploited by sex traffickers. God is inviting us to see them, to care for them, and to advocate for a system that does not leave anyone behind.²

He then continues to say that we might go out this week, not only aware that God sees our struggles and cares, but also God believes in us enough to make a difference with the charge to go out “looking for where God is already at work and *join God's efforts* to see those in distress, help them find comfort and relief, and work for a more just world.”³

God notices. God sees and calls out oppression, inviting us to be part of the redeeming work that is the way of Christ. For most of us there will be no prestige, no recognition, no reward, other than to know that we get to participate in God's work of reconciliation

² Lose, David. <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/pentecost-24-b-surprisingly-good-news/>
Accessed November 4, 2021.

³ Ibid.

and restoration of people to themselves, to others, and to a God. Thank be to God for this challenge, this awareness, and hope. Amen.