

C O N T E N T S

	Introduction	I
1	The Widow's Offering GIVING ALL WE HAVE	4
2	The Widow at Nain FINDING LIFE IN DEATH	16
3	The Woman Healed on the Sabbath SETTING US FREE FROM OUR AILMENTS	28
4	The Woman Whose Daughter Had an Unclean Spirit A PLACE IN THE HOUSEHOLD	40
5	The Woman Healed by a Touch OUTER TRAPPINGS, INNER POWER	52
6	The Woman Caught in Adultery UNDESERVED MERCY	64
7	The Woman with the Alabaster Jar SEEING WITH CHRIST'S EYES	76
8	The Woman at the Well KNOWING AND LOVING	88
	Conclusion	100
	Endnotes	103

The Widow's Offering

GIVING ALL WE HAVE

He sat down opposite the treasury and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 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. 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." ♦ **MARK 12:41–44**

Her Story

It is the day she comes to tithe. She doesn't have much; she never does. How she would get by without those precious coins, she isn't sure. But she brings them anyway. She is so focused on her concerns that she pays little attention to the teacher or the large crowd.

Jesus has just finished denouncing the scribes, indicting them because they are more interested in their own prominence in society than in anyone or anything elsewhere. Oh, they pray—at length—but they “devour widows' houses.” Jesus then sits opposite the treasury and observes those who are making donations.

Today, we make our donations to the parish electronically or when the basket comes around during Mass. Temple donations in Jerusalem were made in a more elaborate, public form. The treasury consisted of thirteen chests. Two were for the annual tax that every Jewish man over the age of twenty paid to help

Cross-References

MARK 12:38–40

Jesus denounces those who give for the sake of appearances

2 CORINTHIANS 9:6–7

Give generously and cheerfully

MATTHEW 19:27

Peter says the disciples have given everything and asks what they will have

with the temple upkeep. The tax was said to have amounted to a couple of days' wages. The other eleven chests were for other offerings, each for a specific purpose—purification, for example, or a burnt or sin offering. The chests were shaped like shofars, or trumpets, wide at the bottom and narrowing toward the top. All the chests were located in the Court of the Women; all purified Jews, men and women, could enter that court.

This is where Jesus sits after his criticism of the scribes. It's a busy day; a crowd of people are coming and going, and "many rich people put in large sums" (Mark 12:41). But Jesus watches one woman in particular. Likely, he knows she is a widow by her clothing; the quality of the fabric indicates that she is not wealthy. Perhaps the scribes had "devoured" her house. Perhaps the couple's savings had been eaten up by charlatans who promised to cure her husband and could not. It would seem there were no adult children to help her. A late-nineteenth-century painting by the French artist James Tissot shows the woman walking away, carrying a young child in her arms, with Jesus and the others watching her. A well-dressed man is making an offering in the background, and similarly dressed men wait behind him to do the same. A modern-day depiction by Darren Gygi shows the woman about to drop her coins into the treasury as a dirty-faced girl holds onto her mother's skirt.

Regardless of how the widow came to her current state in life, when she reaches the treasury, she puts in two pennies. That's what this woman had to give. A couple of pennies, the least valuable Roman coin. Many of us don't even stop to pick up a penny on the sidewalk these days; it's just not worth our while.

Jesus doesn't stop her, doesn't offer a "well done, good and faithful servant." She may not even have heard his words as she walked away.

It is the last time we see Jesus in the temple before he gives his all for us.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE WOMAN?

Unlike many of the women in this Bible study, the widow wasn't healed by Jesus and didn't see someone who was. She doesn't even have a conversation with him and may or may not have heard his words extolling her as an example.

I like to think she *did* hear his words about her. And while she didn't turn around and thank him or ask for help, perhaps hearing his words brought her some solace—and she kept on offering all she had, financially, physically, and spiritually.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE WOMAN

Not long before Jesus and his followers leave for the Passover in Jerusalem, a young man asks Jesus what he must do to have eternal life beyond keeping the commandments. Jesus' answer is not an easy one: "go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21). After the young man goes away, having chosen his possessions over eternal life, Jesus remarks that it will be hard for those with wealth to enter the kingdom. Peter is flummoxed, saying, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" (Matthew 19:27).

Does Jesus really want us to give away everything—all our time, talent, and treasure? Can we truly be assured of a place in heaven if we do that? What's the bare minimum: tithing two

percent, an hour a month of good works, and fifteen minutes a day in prayer? And what will we have if we do, other than less money in the bank, less time with TikTok and Candy Crush, and fewer public accolades? What then will we have?

We may laugh a little and shake our heads at the brazenness of Peter's question, in essence making faith transactional, a quid pro quo. But in our souls, we know we ask the same question and offer bargains that are even more impudent: Cure my mother's cancer, and I'll go to Mass more regularly. Give me that new job, and I'll give my parish more money. Send someone who will pay what I want for my latest sculpture, and I'll give free lessons at the community center. If our offer isn't accepted, we think God is unfair and turn away. If the cancer is cured, the new job is offered, someone buys the sculpture, we forget about what we promised to do in exchange. Rinse, spit, repeat.

It's the story of the human condition: we don't expect something for nothing. We just want that "something" to be on our own terms. And in that, we can learn much from the widow. She may have wailed to God in her darkest moments about why her husband was taken away and why she had nothing but those two coins. But her faith carried her past the wailing. She gave all she had and left without calling attention to herself. She was obedient. That is all God desires of us. It requires us to swallow our own wants and needs and will in favor of the Almighty's. It is everything.

A Story

Learning to Give

I'm a cradle Catholic who left any kind of faith shortly before my sixteenth birthday and returned to full communion in the Church when I was forty-nine. My return coincided, perhaps not surprisingly, with hitting rock bottom. I had been fired in a management change from a job I loved and had taken a position in the federal government in a city five hundred miles away where I knew a total of two people. I left behind an estranged husband who had amassed a quarter of a million dollars in credit card debt.

As I was returning to faith, I filed for bankruptcy, which meant I repaid more than \$100,000 of that debt in three years. At the beginning of that time, my take-home pay was less than a thousand dollars a month, and that didn't go very far in 2005 in the Washington, DC, area. I did a lot of freelance editing at nights and on weekends, but I likely wouldn't have made it if one of my sisters hadn't moved to the area and become my roommate.

I was very grateful to God for showing me love and mercy, and a good share of what was left after the rent and utilities went to my parish. It wasn't much, maybe fifty dollars some months. But it truly was all I had. And God took care of me.

As my take-home pay grew, so did my financial generosity. That was easy. I've lived on almost nothing, after all. But I am not so generous with giving God my time.

In March 2020, I had been praying the Divine Office most days for two months. I was co-facilitating a weekly women's Bible study group. I was praying the Rosary most evenings before I went to bed.

But then COVID came. And while you would have thought that having all that time when things were shut down would have greatly enhanced my prayer practice and time with God, the opposite became true. We had to end the Bible study and, at that point, electronic options weren't as available as they are now. My day job routine changed so that finding those ten or twenty minutes in the morning and throughout the day became "impossible." At least, that's what I told myself. I still prayed the Rosary each night, but mostly, as a priest once put it to me, "the angels finished it."

A nearby parish brought back an early Sunday morning Mass with distancing and masking the following January, and I was slammed in the face with the reason I had returned to faith: to be fed by the Eucharist. While it had been fun to attend virtual Masses in France, Ireland, Canada, England, Scotland, and Malaysia, for me it wasn't really Mass without the Eucharist. Jesus was giving me his all, but I still was squeezing him in on my terms.

In the spring of 2023, I attended a three-day retreat on authenticity. I planned to spend most of it writing this book. But the first evening, the speaker talked about trust: "Whom can we trust to tell us who we really are? Can we trust ourselves? Our friends? Our enemies? TV commercials? Let's listen to the one who knows best—the one who made us." Then she gave us some lovely Scripture verses about God's love for us. After the reflection, I spent many hours thinking about trusting God. Love God? Of course. Attempt to be obedient? Of course. Trust God? Hmmm.

I realized that I had lost that woman who gave what she had—almost nothing—when she took her first halting steps back to Mass in the late summer of 2005. I trusted God then because I had nowhere else to turn. And the Almighty gracious-

ly accepted the mess that I was and welcomed me with open arms. I had been deluding myself that if I was a generous giver monetarily, it didn't matter whether I was still giving my all in faith.

I am now working my way back to trust. I have some sympathy for the scribes Jesus calls out in Mark 12. Maybe I wasn't bragging about what I give financially, as they were, but I was holding back in another important way—time. Strange as it seems to me, I'm relearning that the Lord actually desires to spend time with me. He wants more than my money, more than volunteering. He. Wants. Time. With Me. Imperfect, messy me.

I recently ran across this quote from Thomas Merton: "In order to become myself I must cease to be what I always wanted to be." I'd take that a step further: In order to become myself, I must cease to be what *I* think God wants and trust that the Lord will illumine who I am to become. That can be the most difficult gift of all for us to give the Lord—our trust.

A Deeper Dive

"He sees even this poor widow, whom others brush past with haste or contempt.

He knows her struggle and sacrifice and single-heartedness, as she brings that tiny offering, with a blush of shame that it is so little, and secretly lets it fall into the treasury of her God. His condescension is still displayed to the meanest and the humblest worshipers, and broken words, paltry gifts, and feeble efforts will not be without his notice and recompense."

A. ROWLAND⁴

Putting in Everything She Had *Saint Lucy Pak Hiu-sun (1801–1839)*

In 1984, Pope John Paul II traveled to Seoul to canonize ninety-three Koreans and ten French missionaries who died for their faith between 1839 and 1867. Among the best known was Andrew Kim Taegon, the first Korean-born Catholic priest, who was just twenty-five years old when he was tortured and beheaded in 1846.

Lucy Pak Hiu-sun's name is seldom invoked when we talk about our glorious martyrs, and that's a shame. For just as the widow Jesus lauded offered everything she had, so did Lucy.

Lucy was born into Korean nobility. She was known not only for her beauty, but also for her well-formed mind. She studied in both Korean and Chinese. That combination led to fifteen years of service at the royal palace, including time as a lady-in-waiting to Queen Sunwon, who was just a year younger than Lucy. Lucy was also politically adept; she managed to fend off the king's advances and remain in the queen's good graces.

She was about thirty when she heard the gospel proclaimed for the first time. This Jesus and his teachings were a revelation to Lucy and came at a moment when she had begun to question the excesses of palace life. A role at the palace was both highly valued and difficult to leave alive, but Lucy convinced people that she was ill and so was allowed to go.

But to where? Her father would not accept her, given her budding dangerous views. She eventually moved in with a nephew, renouncing her fine clothing and other trappings. Her example was so moving that her nephew and his family con-

verted to Catholicism, as did her older sister when she joined the household.

The year 1839 brought an edict severely limiting the practice of Catholicism; later in the year, it was outlawed entirely in Korea. It was in this climate that Lucy went out to greet the authorities, offering them food and wine, when they arrived at the house on April 1. She said it was God's will they had arrived, so they should be welcomed.

Lucy had given much for Jesus before her martyrdom—her social standing, her beautiful clothes, many of her family relationships. It is said that Lucy's torture was worse than the women with whom she was imprisoned, the authorities' logic being that she had betrayed the law and the court in converting. Along with eight others, she gave her all and was beheaded on May 24, 1839.

Unforgettable You

CONTEMPLATION

Think about or discuss:

- What do you think happened to the widow who gave all she had? What might her life have been like five or ten years after this day?
- Why didn't Jesus ask the woman to stop and talk with him? How might her life had been affected if he had?
- What have you given up for Jesus, tangibly or intangibly? What is he asking you to give him that you'd rather keep—and why do you want to keep it? This may not be money, but perhaps time or forgiveness or grace to someone you find difficult to be around, much less love.

ACTION

Look at the James Tissot or Darren Gygi paintings of the widow, or find another depiction. Journal about your thoughts about the widow or others who are shown. Or gather images of what giving your all for Christ means to you.

PRAYER

Jesus, I am not good at giving my all for you; there are possessions I would rather keep, even though I know they get in the way of my loving you.

There are wounds I would rather let fester than bring them to you for healing. Please help me to unclutch my hands from these things and offer myself completely to you. Amen.