

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 11.11.2018



## What We Live On Rev. Katherine C. Kerr

Mark 12:38-44

Have you ever read a book or article, or listened to a speaker, and thought, “that is just what I think, only I’ve never been able to articulate it like that?” You just connect with what they’re saying and it gives voice to your own thoughts and feelings in a way you’ve never expressed them. It doesn’t happen a whole lot, but when it does, it’s exciting. It’s a great, validating experience.

I’ve been having that experience a lot lately with a book I’m reading with the women of the Thursday Morning Bible Study. Inspired is the second book by Rachel Held Evans, and it has been described by another writer as “a love letter to scripture.” It’s a deeply thought out, carefully researched and lovingly written examination of the Bible, which is, to Evans, “a living, breathing, captivating, and confounding book that is able to equip us to join God’s loving and redemptive work in the world.” That’s what I think, too – I’ve just never been able to express it quite like that!

Evans is a blogger-turned-book author who grew up in an evangelical home in East Tennessee, deeply immersed in a particular type of church community. She has long been open about her personal faith journey from a fundamentalist world view to a near-rejection of the church to where she is now- a scholar and writer of scripture and faith raising a family in the Episcopal church. She’s one of my favorite writers, and Inspired is quickly becoming one of my favorite books.

In her chapter on the gospels, Evans talks about the uniqueness of the story of Jesus’ life, zeroing in on the amazing way this story of the Word made flesh, the most epic and amazing thing ever to happen, is also a story that is



approachable and real and so very human. The gospels, she writes, present a story “at once grand and particular, sweeping and intimate.”

She goes on to liken the whole of the gospel to a mosaic, wherein each story is “a part of a larger story, yet beautiful and truthful on its own.”

Reflecting on this morning’s passage, I can’t think of a better description. This story, often referred to as the story of the widow’s mite, referencing the small coins she offered to the Lord, is not one of the marquee stories of scripture- it’s not one we hear a lot about. It’s like a tiny chip of tile in a mosaic- almost unnoticeable in the whole picture, but if it were missing, the picture wouldn’t quite be complete.

This passage comes in a larger unit made up of Jesus’ teachings in Jerusalem, in between his triumphal entry and his crucifixion. That context immediately puts a spotlight on it. Mark presents this time as one of conflict between Jesus and the so-called authorities of the day- the religious leaders who touted the letter of the law but often failed to live into the spirit of the law.

We see this clearly at the start of this morning’s passage- Jesus minces no words in his description of the scribes, who wander the temples in their fancy robes, expect to be treated respectfully wherever they go, and seek to impress with their verbose prayers, while at the same time “devour[ing] widows’ houses” – taking advantage of and harming the most vulnerable in society. He paints a clear and unflattering picture of these so-called pillars of the community whose actions are really not about others, but about themselves. They live to receive honor and glory and praise for themselves, with little to no thought for anyone else.

It is in this context that Jesus turns to the least likely heroine of anyone’s story- he points to a poor widow making her way through the crowd of scribes, business people, families and wealthy men at the Temple. While others seem to make a big show of placing their “large sums” in the treasury, this woman approaches with her offering- the smallest coin- a mite, or a penny. It’s all she has, and she offers it to God.

It’s not uncommon for this passage to be used as a stewardship lesson, and it is often interpreted as a call for all of us to follow this widow’s lead financially



and give all the money we have to the church. It's understandable how we might believe that this is the thrust of the story- she gave all of the money she had, so we should too.

But I want us to consider this morning that this story might actually be asking more from us.

That's a hard thing to wrap our minds around, because we are so accustomed to thinking about money, or at least material items, when we think about what we have to offer- to this world, or to God. And what we give materially to the church matters.

But reducing this little story to being primarily about something as flat and lifeless as money robs it of its true impact. When we hold this gem of a story up to the light, we begin to see that what this woman did was so much more than just give a penny to the church.

There's a reason Jesus pointed out this particular woman in the midst of the throngs of people in the Temple that day. In pointing to this widow and her offering, Jesus highlights something powerful, something he wants us all to see. It isn't the small coin that she put into the offering. It's what the small coin represented - the fact that this woman "put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

This story points to a truth about discipleship that runs throughout scripture. For while we are very focused on what we have materially, it is clear from Genesis through Revelation that God is interested in something else. While our material resources are important for the work of God's kingdom on earth, what God truly wants from us is so much more than our money.

Preaching professor Karoline Lewis writes that, "if we reduce the widow's giving to our giving to the church, we miss the point entirely." Unlike many popular interpretations of this passage, Lewis argues that this widow is not some unreachable example set up to show us how poor our own offerings are. Rather, she asserts, the widow demonstrates true discipleship in how she embodies Jesus' own ministry. God became human not just to teach us some moral lessons. God became human to give up that life for the sake of all of creation. "This is the essence of God," Lewis states, "to give God's whole self."



God gave it all for us, and if we are to follow Christ, then we must be willing to give our whole lives to him- to offer him all that we have to live on, just as the poor widow did.

So what does that mean?

Well think about it - what do you live on? I'm not just talking about your work life or your paycheck- I'm talking about your whole life. What defines you? What makes you special? What do you have to offer? Who are you at your core? What do you live on?

Bob Goff is a lawyer, professor and writer from California who founded a nonprofit called Love Does, that operates schools and safe houses for women and children in places like Somalia, Iraq, and Uganda. He is also a writer, and in his book Everybody Always, he propounds the radical notion that God is love, and God "wants us to become love." He says that Jesus taught his disciples (and remember, we are his disciples too) that our identity isn't created by what we believe or what we do, but rather by how we love.

Goff shares the story of Karl, a friend of his who suffered a tragic accident as a teenager. He was with friends at a lake one summer day. Seeing a group of girls he wanted to impress, he ran down the dock where they were sitting, and jumped over their heads to dive into the water. He didn't realize how shallow the lake was there, and he severely damaged his spinal cord.

Goff writes:

Karl's neck injury had been so massive and his spinal cord was so damaged, the only things he would ever fully be able to use were his tongue, his eyes, and his mind. Karl stayed in the hospital for months. He had stabilized, and the doctors and nurses switched their attention to helping him function in his new reality. During that time, a special vehicle was built so Karl could have mobility. Because Karl had the use of his tongue, a straw was attached to the steering mechanism. Karl uses small puffs of air and his tongue to steer forward and backward, to start, stop, and turn.

He began figuring things out one by one all over again. The specialized steering unit was outfitted so Karl could answer the telephone, write emails, and



do just about every other task the rest of us take for granted. Karl had to relearn how to navigate his entire life using just his tongue, his eyes, and his mind.

Karl wasn't a quitter. Even though his body had been wrecked, he still had the spirit of a fighter and a prankster. He took up the challenge with gusto. After graduating from high school, Karl went to college.

Goff then describes how he and Karl met as classmates in law school.

He was a hard guy to miss in the hallway with the machine he used to get around. He was stunningly kind and smart and loving. What was most striking about him, though, was he found a freedom in life most of us are still looking for in ours.

Since passing the bar on his first try, Karl has been working at the attorney general's office. His quick mind and even quicker tongue have proven to be more than enough for him to make his mark on the world, to do justice, and to express his love for God in many ways. Karl has had five cases go to California's supreme court. He won five times. Not only this, but he's had more than one hundred published decisions that have shaped the laws on criminal justice and victims' rights, affecting millions of people.

There's no question that Karl's story is an amazing one. Though his body was broken, he never allowed his life to be. He took what he had, and used it to spread love, kindness and justice. He has clearly had an impact on Bob Goff, and on countless others, and he's obviously a remarkable human being. But Goff believes, and I agree, that we all have the ability to do something like this.

Like the widow in this morning's story did, and like Karl has, "Jesus tells us to bring what we have to him, and he will make something amazing of it."

Friends, we are not defined by our titles or our paychecks. We are not our houses or our cars, our club memberships or our social circles. Those external, material markers say nothing about who we truly are. The world might look at those to make judgments about us, but our God has no interest in them.

Our God knows us completely- who we are, what we do, and what we love. And though none of us ever gets it right all of the time, and all of us mess up some of the time, our God loves us still.



God came to live among us to show God's extraordinary, boundless love for creation. And God gave that life up on the cross that we might never question how deeply loved and fully forgiven we are.

And in return, all God asks of us is to give God what we live on. Our love, our lives, our selves. Instead of giving our best to this world, and offering God what is left over, our focus ought to be on what we give to God first. Our devotion and attention, our commitment and our care belong first and foremost to God.

It is risky and scary to think about living like this, but that is why it is called faith. Taking a step out of our comfort zone of what the world expects of us to put our whole trust in God, honoring the one who created us and sustains our lives by giving of ourselves to God's divine purpose and will -

It is at once the hardest and the easiest thing to do.

