

John 3:16-21

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Isaiah 6:1-8 (NRSV)

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” ⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

Mark 12:38-44 (NRSV)

³⁸As 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, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

⁴¹He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then 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. ⁴⁴For 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.”

What does it really mean to be all in?

Where can we turn for examples that challenge all of us to be all in?

You’ve probably seen some of the Olympic marathoners who drag themselves across the finish line, literally. They have given everything they have, there is nothing left. All their energy, all their strength. Everything has been given to the race. They are “all in.”

“All in” is an old expression. It originated in the 19th century, according to the OED, and spoke to the exhaustion that comes from having given everything. Like a lumberjack who is “all in” after clearing a large stand of trees. In the early 20th century “all in” took on an additional meaning: “completely or wholeheartedly involved.” Thus, for example, when used in poker, “all in” means pushing all of one’s chips to the pot in a single wager—there is nothing left, everything has been given over, the player has held nothing back.

In a way, the Bible is a book of “all in” stories. . . . and being “all in” begins with God.

The All In God

Do you ever wonder why God doesn’t just walk away from the humans and this tiny planet after the humans choose against him in the Garden of Eden? Why not try again?

Really. Head to Alpha Centauri, make a few improvements, and see if he could create a people who would simply love God and neighbor for all time over near.

But, curiously, God doesn't walk away. Yes, the relationship between God and the humans he created is deeply ruptured, but God begins a relentless campaign to restore what was broken, to reconcile the relationships that had been torn asunder. And God never relents. It seems that abandoning those whom he has created is simply against God's nature.

The people whine and moan in the wilderness after fleeing Egypt, even worshiping a golden figurine, but God still presses on with them. When the people give in to their fears and turn back from the Promised Land, despite God's many promises, God stays on track, bringing their children into Canaan. Century after century God would raise up prophets who called the people back to God in the hope that, this one time, the people would return to God for good. They don't, but God never gives up. He was all in the beginning and would stay all in: completely and wholeheartedly involved.

Even when God's people proved absolutely incapable of genuine and lasting repentance and reconciliation, rather than give up, God undertook to do and be for his people what they were unable to do and be for themselves. God became one of them, a first-century Jew, born in human likeness and form. Jesus, this only-begotten son of God, would be faithful to the covenant the people had made with God at Mt. Sinai, even as Jesus' faithfulness led him inexorably toward a Roman cross. How could God be more completely and wholeheartedly involved?

It is so important for us to grasp that the incarnation, the babe born to a young Galilean girl, reveals to us the deepest and most important truths about God. This "all in God" is willing to set aside his privileges and suffer pain, humiliation, and even death by torture for your sake, for mine, for us all. As John writes in his gospel (3:16):

¹⁶"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Some all in people

Despite the long Old Testament story of Israel's inability to fully commit to God and God's ways, the Bible is replete with stories of people who went all in.

There is Ruth, who, rather than abandoning her destitute mother-in-law to return to her own people, told her "your people will be my people and your God will be my God." There is Samuel, to whom God came when he was still a young boy. Or Isaiah, who in a strange vision hears God asking "Whom can I send?" and responds simply, "Here I am, send me." Just a simple, unadorned "send me." Nothing held back, no "let me check," just a declarative "Yes, I'm all in."

There is Peter, who thought he was all in until he was tested and found to be wanting. But, God never gives up, and Peter got another chance to be completely and wholeheartedly involved. He seized that chance and never let go. There is Paul, who plunged in all the way after being confronted by Jesus on the Damascus road. "All in" would define Paul from that point forward. And Paul's younger associate, Timothy, who was willing to undergo circumcision to make himself more acceptable to the Jews that Paul so desperately wanted to reach. That's being all in.

As person after person from the pages of the Bible present themselves to my mind, it is obvious that what God hopes and wants for us is that we be all in, that we be completely and wholeheartedly involved in our relationship with God, with others, and with God's work in this world.

There is one more person with whom we need to reacquaint ourselves as we seek to grasp what an all in life with God really looks like. Here is her story.

The all in widow

Her story is told in the twelfth chapter of Mark's gospel. As with all biblical stories, the setting is important to appreciating today's scripture passage. Jesus has entered Jerusalem to waving palms. He has wept over the city, knowing where things are headed. He has been to the temple, where, invoking the words and actions of Jeremiah, he has pronounced warnings against the temple, the nation, and all those who refuse to embrace Jesus and the path that he has laid before them. In response to all this, groups have come forward to trap Jesus in a mistake. The Pharisees have tried to trap him over the question of taxes. The Sadducees have tried to trap him over the question of the resurrection. Others have tried to use David's words against him. Now, a crowd is gathered around Jesus and his disciples as they sit in the temple courtyard. The stakes could not be higher.

Scribes?

There are various groups that swirl through and around the Gospel accounts, such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, priests, scribes, and more. Who were these groups? Today's passage from Mark includes the scribes. Who were they?

In a general sense, a scribe was simply someone who could read and write. That doesn't seem like much in our culture, but in the ancient world such people were pretty rare. In Jesus' day, perhaps less than 10-15% of people were literate and many of those were barely so. Thus, we shouldn't be surprised that scribal classes developed in ancient cultures. Scribes came to be those who were able to gain the skills and learning needed to build a career around their literacy.

Scribes were the educated intelligentsia and were widely respected for their learning. This would be especially true among the Jews who cherished the Word of God contained in the written Hebrew scrolls. For example, Ezra the scribe was sent by the Persian king to guide and instruct the inhabitants of Judea after the Babylonian exile. Ezra was an official in the Persian Empire and educated in the laws and customs of Israel (see Ezra 7).

The Jewish scribes in Jesus' day were leaders in the community and were often wealthy. They were easily susceptible to the twin temptations of pride and greed. Of course, who among us is immune to these temptations? There are many warnings to the early Christian leaders as well (Acts 4:32-5:11; 20:33-35; Romans 16:18; Philippians 3:19; 1 Peter 5:2-3; 2 Peter 2:3).

Perhaps a little melodramatically, Jesus raises his voice so that everyone can hear him. He is ostensibly teaching his disciples but he wants to make sure that no one misses a thing! Jesus draws the crowd's attention to scribes walking through the temple. How they love to walk around so that all can see their importance. How they love the best seats, the places of honor, the deferential greetings – all as they consume the property of widows. One could hardly paint a more compelling picture of the worst in human pride and greed. And all this is directed at the scribes, those the crowd sees as the learned spiritual leaders of Israel!

Then Jesus draws the crowd's attention to the chests in which visitors could place their temple offerings.¹ The rich are stopping by to drop in their gifts and Luke is clear that these are non-obligatory contributions. But Jesus points the listening crowd to a woman, a poor widow,² who drops two "lepta" in one of the chests. A lepta was the smallest value coin, equivalent to about 1/128th of the average daily wage! In a pointed

¹Josephus, writer of a late first-century Jewish history, reports that there were thirteen collection chests located in the Court of the Women in the temple courtyards. Each chest was designated for a different use.

²Widows were at the bottom of the social ladder and epitomized the needy. Under the Law of Moses, the Jews were obligated to look after the needs of widows and orphans.

comment, Jesus says that the rich gave out of their “left-overs” (from J. Nolland’s translation), whereas the widow dropped in all that she had. In contrast to the gifts of the rich, the widow has made hers out of a passionate and wholehearted commitment. For her, it was a matter of love pointedly expressed in how she used the little money she had.

An all in heart

Everyone gets involved in something. Everyone commits somewhere in their lives. The only question is where we direct our focus and commitment. In the temple courtyard, Jesus draws a stark contrast. On the one hand, the scribes have allowed their many talents and their successes to grab hold of their hearts, turning them inward. They live for the trappings and privileges of the elite, perhaps blind to the harm they do. Indeed, at best, they have grown to be morally and spiritually blind; at worst, they have grown to be calculating exploiters of the weak. Simply put, they are all in when it comes to the pursuit of wealth and status.

We know nothing of the widow’s life, but we do know that she has grown to have a heart that is passionately devoted to God’s cause. She is destitute in a way that you and I can’t imagine. There is no Social Security or Medicare. All she has is a couple of nearly worthless coins, yet she offers them to God. There is no reason to think she is a fool. She must know that her two lepta will make zero difference to the temple. But she knows that she gives not based upon what the temple needs, nor even what God needs, but out of her own need, her own faithful heart’s need to give generously, her need to be all in. It is her heart that matters, not her household budget. For her, it is a matter of love and Jesus knows that out of love, she has given far more than all the rich people lined up at the chests.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The story of the widow and her coins is often referred to as the story of the “Widow’s Mite.” It is very popular during annual stewardship campaigns. A person could be excused for thinking that perhaps Jesus told this brief story for the express purpose of helping pastors talk about money!

I’ve read countless articles and letters from pastors expressing how much they dread this time of year. Indeed, if you prowl the web for awhile you can find entire compilations of their expressed anxieties. One pastor recently wrote, “Yet it never fails: the Sundays I preach on money, someone tells me, “I’ve been working on a friend for a long time, and he finally came this morning when you preached on money. I’m not sure I’m going to be able to get him back, and it’s your fault.” For my own part I used to ask questions like, “Do you really need more money?” or “How can you possibly expect me to do more?” But this was before I came to realize that I had this all backwards. The question is not how much of our hard-earned money Patti and I will give, it is how much we will keep. The widow provided the answer to that question.

You might discuss this change in orientation. What is involved in making the change? What are its implications? Where we would begin? Where do you think such a change would lead you?

The story of the widow is not about money, it is a story of the heart. The hearts of the scribes and the rich had turned inward. But the widow’s heart was consumed with her love of God and neighbor. Spend some time discussing this story. Feel free to use your imagination! What sort of person do you imagine the widow to have been?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Exodus 35:4-29 The Israelite men and women gather to contribute materials needed to construct the tabernacle, the moveable dwelling place of God.</p>	<p>Tuesday, 1 Chronicles 29:1-9 The Israelites joyfully bring all that they have for the construction of the temple of Jerusalem. You'll see that the sums collected are quite staggering.</p>
<p>Wednesday, 2 Corinthians 8:1-5 Paul commends poor congregations who have given generously to an offering that Paul has collected for the poor in Jerusalem.</p>	<p>Thursday, Acts 4:36-37; Acts 11:27-30 Examples of generosity among the early Christians.</p>
<p>Friday, Romans 15:25-28; Philippians 4:10-19 Some more examples of the believers' generosity.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

