

## The Matching Game

Sometimes we don't think about how much of what we do depends upon our ability to put things together in a proper sequence...to match things that are alike together. That is probably why some of the earliest childhood toys that we give children are based on that concept...get all the blue ones in a row...put the circle shapes in the circle hole...and so on. We begin working on making sure that matching association of like to like happens early in development—sometimes not even recognizing some of the unintended consequences which are built into the toys and games which we give to children. Even the games that are most popular today on those hand held devices often are based on the ability to quickly organize things that are alike—to sort things into groups of similar items—to find patterns so that organization can result and chaos avoided. It is a fundamental aspect of our life together and often more than a game is involved. Patterns and organization, boundaries and ways of sorting ourselves have always marked human communities and ways of living—and these boundaries by which we sort ourselves are usually based on the concept of like or not. We sort and match ourselves into groups where we surround ourselves with others who are like us—with those with whom we are most comfortable. Once upon a time...now that sounds like the beginning of a tall tale about long ago...but it refers to a time when communications were not instantaneous—when each town or village was isolated—and each community was probably uniform—consisting of residents who came from the same roots, had the same or very similar backgrounds...then the ways of communications changes...distances that people traveled became longer...the times to travel between places shorter...the people and ways of the people we met became much more varied...and it became more difficult to keep the sorting into definitive groups of clearly defined “alikes” small...the matching game became more difficult as it was harder to see how some of these “others” were really all that “other”. Sorting became more of a challenge, if one looked carefully. And so we as communities of faith are presented with challenges which make us uncomfortable. I am sure the connection of this concept of matching to the gospel may not seem at first to be linked to Mark's narrative for today, but our journey with Mark now has us sitting with Jesus in the Temple courtyard during the final week of his life. He has been fending off testing by a group of Pharisees and scribe seeking to discredit him. Just before this passage he has engaged with one scribe in a favorable exchange about the most important commandments. As this text begins, Jesus seem to be addressing his disciples with a warning: “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplace, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.” It is important to note that Jesus is not warning against all scribes, but only those whose behavior he is describing: behavior which seeks admiration, honor and respect while doing harm to the ones God has declared to be given care. These particular scribes are seeking to be honored for their role in the religious and power structure of the day while they are using that station and power to violate the commandments given in the covenant to provide for the orphan, the widow, and the resident alien. Their actions and behavior do not match what should flow from a holder of the office where God's commandments are followed. Having given his disciples this warning

about some of the people he is observing moving about in the courtyard, Jesus then sat down opposite the treasury and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. This was the location in the Temple courtyard where the Temple offerings were made. Considering the time of the year, the courtyard was crowded; Mark tells us that “many rich people put in large sums.” Yet what Jesus points out to his disciples was this: “a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.” Jesus calls 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.” The usual English translations soften the Greek expression *olon ton bion autes* which literally means her whole life. The actual Greek more closely links this passage to the discussion Jesus had previously with the scribe who was “near” the kingdom, where it was agreed the first commandment was: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” Jesus is very near completing his mission of obedience to the Father by giving his all. Often, when this passage is lifted up for our consideration two things are done. Both of which are obvious points of the narrative: Jesus is criticizing the hypocrisy of the scribes who should be concerned with the welfare of the widows instead of “devouring” their houses instead of seeking admiration for their appearances; the other point that is clear is that the widow’s mite which she gives is a sacrificial donation—a total giving which is more meaningful than the larger donations given by the many out of their “abundance.” Jesus identifies the widow as having given more than the others because she has given herself; rather than lifting up those in the long robes with power and influence, Jesus lifts up the widow who has given her loyalty. It is important for us to remember; to keep front and center what consumes us; what commands our loyalty. If we are consumed by power, social media, beauty, or money, they will dominate our lives and will eventually leave us empty and hungry. Emptiness devours us, and it promises a life it cannot give. So when we contemplate these comparisons and match them against our choices, our priorities about where our loyalties lie...do our proclamations and loyalties resemble those of scribes or those of the widow? But what is not often pointed out is that while the scribes try to call attention to their actions; the widow does not. She comes and gives all that she has because of her trust and loyalty in her God; not seeking recognition or notice. Yet Jesus does indeed notice her. And what if Mark isn’t trying to derive from her story a theological argument about how much we should be giving. Perhaps the narrative point on which this passage turns isn’t the comparisons between her and others, or between her offering and others, but rather centers on the simple but notable fact that Jesus notices her among the many in the crowd in the courtyard in front of the treasury. That, I think, is not a given. Note that Mark record that Jesus is watching “the crowd” putting money into the treasury. Moreover, “many rice people were putting in significantly larger sums.” Yet despite that fact that she is just one in a crowd, and that many people were putting in significantly larger sums, Jesus’ attention is given to, even fixed upon, the much smaller, if not paltry, offering of this woman. And whatever it is that Jesus wants his disciples to learn from her, perhaps the first lesson we should learn is simple to notice her. To see her. To acknowledge her person, her being, her plight, and her offering. She is not, in the end, an object lesson, but

a person. Easily unseen, even invisible, yet worthy of Jesus' attention and ours. In this view of the passage we find a lesson for our lives...who are we not seeing that Jesus sees as we go about our daily lives? Who have we forgotten, ignored or overlooked, that our Lord would have us notice, recognized and honor? Who have we placed into a group that does not "match" us for some reason that we no longer recognize and thus declared them "invisible" and "not worthy" of our attention or concern? Because this passage tells us that Jesus sees them. And the truly good news of the gospel is that Jesus also sees us...and loves us...and deems us worthy of God's attention, and frees us to give that same compassionate regard to others. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.