

“She Gave Her All!”
Mark 12:38-44

I was reading some postings on facebook one day and I stumbled upon an article written by Observer columnist, the Rev. Trisha Elliott that she titles: *Canadian artist who painted horrors of post-war Europe was nearly forgotten*. Under the title was a short blurb that drew my undivided attention. “Mary Riter Hamilton created more than 300 paintings that capture the death and destruction of the Great War. But years later, some of her works ended up molding in a library.” I immediately found myself reading the whole article with enthusiasm and I thought to myself, what a wonderful story to share on Remembrance Day.

(13) Mary Riter Hamilton was born in Teeswater, Ontario in 1843, and raised in Clearwater, Manitoba. She studied art in Europe, where her paintings garnered considerable attention and then returned to Canada. In 1919, she undertook a "special mission" for the War Amputations of Canada. Her task was to provide paintings of the destructions caused by battlefields of France and Belgium for publication in a veterans' magazine, *The Gold Stripe*. She stayed in Europe for several years, producing over 300 battlefield paintings during the years 1919 to 1922.

During her lifetime, Ms. Hamilton endured incredible hardships: makeshift shelters, poor food and hostile weather. Her deep desire to document the horror and carnage of war for fellow Canadians eventually left her emotionally and physically drained. She was never able to paint with the same intensity again. Despite her poverty, Mary Riter Hamilton refused to sell any of her battlefield paintings, choosing instead to donate the canvases to the National Archives (now part of Library and Archives Canada). She wanted them to remain in the hands of all Canadians for the benefit of war veterans and their descendants. She offered everything she had. Trisha Elliott wrote: “Her hope that Canadians would recall the realities of war she portrayed in her art mirrors my hope for her—that they will also deem her an artist worthy of remembrance.”

Today’s gospel reading is about a widow offering her two mites. This is a popular story for during Stewardship Campaign in many churches around the world. Who hasn’t heard the moving account of the widow who went into the Temple, drops her very modest offering into the treasury, and had been used by preachers to illustrate the meaning of giving?

I have been reflecting on this story not because the story indicts my personal giving. But because this story has another twist to it that I'd like to admit. Something in me doesn't want her reduced to a moral, or exploited for the sake of stewardship campaigns and annual budgets. Whenever I read this passage, I often wonder about the widow's state of mind. What was she thinking as she walked up to the alms box at the temple and put in every cent of earthly treasure she owned? Did she feel a sense of responsibility? Did she feel it was an expectation of the temple that even she, a lowly widow, must contribute to the temple, even if it's the last scrap of wealth she has? Did she fear a rebuke or retribution or shame if she didn't give?

But here is another interpretation of this story. Jesus in my opinion used her as an illustration of the corruption of those in political & religious power who are devouring the poor. She was a sharp contrast to those in power. Those who flaunt their authority in public but completely ignore the plight of the needy. Often misread as a statement in praise of 'sacrificial' giving, Jesus' observation concerning the widow's offering at the temple is designed to condemn exploitative structures that prey upon the most vulnerable. We should not be able to read this account without reflecting upon comparable systems of economic injustice in our own day.

She represents the on-going exploitation of the poor by the Temple elite. That the religious leaders who were supposed to look after the widows are not doing their responsibility yet expects them to offer money in order to access the temple. I wish I knew her name. I wish I knew for sure that her real-life fierceness exceeded the piety we've imposed on her. I hope Jesus was able to talk to her in person just like he did with the Samaritan woman at the well.

Mark did not tell us if she had lived longer or died few days after she offered her last coins. Yes I'm sure she *died*. She died, probably mere days after she dropped those two coins into the Temple treasury. In case that's a surprise, consider again what Jesus said about her as she left the Temple that day: "She - out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." Jesus wasn't exaggerating at all. If he says the woman gave everything she had, well, she gave her all - everything she had. We know she was an impoverished widow in first century Palestine, a woman living on the margins of her society. She had no safety net. No support system of any sort. No husband to look after her, no social status to be proud of. She was vulnerable in every single way that mattered.

Centuries of stewardship sermons on this story make us think that Jesus commends the widow. In my opinion, Jesus never did. He did not applaud her self-sacrifice, or invites us to follow in her footsteps. He simply notices her, and tells his disciples to notice her, too. Jesus *notices* the widow. He sees what everyone else is too busy, too grand, too spiritual, and too self-absorbed to see. For me, this is the only redemptive part of the story — that Jesus's eyes are ever on the small, the insignificant, the hidden.

What did Jesus notice in her? Debbie Thomas offers her comments: She said: “Jesus noticed the widow's courage. It took quite a bit of courage for her to make her gift alongside the rich with their fistfuls of coins. Even more to allow the last scraps of her security to fall out of her palms. And more still to swallow panic, swallow desperation, swallow the entirely human desire to cling to life no matter what — and face her end with hope.

Jesus noticed her dignity. Surely she had to steel herself when widowhood rendered her worthless — a person marked "expendable" even in the Temple she loved. Surely she had to trust — in the face of all the evidence piled up around her — that her tiny gift had value in God's eyes.

And finally, Jesus noticed her vocation. Whether she knew it or not, the widow's action in the Temple that day was prophetic. She was a prophet in the sense that her costly offering amounted to a holy denunciation of injustice and corruption. She had to offer everything she had to live on. A self-sacrifice if you ask me.

Today is a time of many complex emotions. When we think of the “crosses row on row...” we mourn for the many, many young lives cut short by war. Those fallen soldiers never got the chance to grow old. They have given everything they had – their future, their life. If their death can awake in us an understanding of our need to break down barriers of hate and the call to all of humankind to discover in each other their common, God-given humanity, then we are remembering them as they should be remembered. And remembering what they gave for us. That we might build a better world. Today, we honour and notice intentionally their courage, their dignity, their vocation.

Remembrance Day is not just about remembering – it is more about affirming gratitude. Whether or not we choose to support Canada’s military or foreign policy, we need to support the ordinary people – those who fought and are still out there fighting in wars. We need to earnestly say “thank you.” But our thanksgiving should lead to action, not in idleness, both in support of the well-being of the veterans and survivors and their loved ones, especially those who have been injured or traumatized by war.

Many of us have stories to tell – stories of both joy and sorrow. Stories of loved ones lost and those who stood proud after the wars were over. This day is a day of solemn honour as we seek God's wisdom and the will to preserve the hard-earned peace offered by those who served in wars. We are here to remember human sacrifice and suffering with a commitment to support the veterans and their families. To say no to terror and violence and hatred that prevails in the world. And when the sun sets and we face the darkness of the world, all we can do is pray that God will give *us* some relief from our moments of uncertainties, from our very own storms in life. Remember the story of Mary Riter Hamilton. Remember the story of the widow and her offering. Remember those who fought and are still fighting for true peace and freedom. Lest we forget. Amen.