On April 11, 2009, an unknown unemployed 47-year-old woman took the stage of the television talent show, *Britain’s Got Talent*. She was, by even the most generous account, frumpy in appearance, awkward on stage, the personification of nervous fear as she walked out to the small piece of tape marking her spot at center stage, facing a large cynical audience accustomed to beautiful young talent acts, and a trio of judges chaired by the infamously harsh critic, Simon Cowell. She was a most unappealing and unpromising contestant, if ever there was one. But as the muffled laughter died down, Susan Boyle opened her mouth and out poured the haunting lyrics and beguiling melody of “I Dreamed a Dream,” from *Les Miserables*. It was a powerful and confident voice that seemed not to match the body from which it sprang. She sang like an angel set free, a muse filling the room--and the hearts--of everyone there. As she sang the audience was transformed from cynics to converts. They listened in stunned silence for a few seconds, then burst
forth into standing ovation throughout the rest of her song. Every eye was wide with wonder, and wet with inspiration. And in that moment, the dream that Susan Boyle dreamed . . . actually came true.

It is a great story. Rags to riches. Anonymous to YouTube sensation overnight. From “no prospects” to “no limits” in an instant. Don’t you love the Susan Boyle story, as much as her beautiful voice? Makes you wonder how many heroes and champions are living right among us, lacking only their chance to show the world their hidden gifts? What great business ideas fail to be born for lack of adequate capital? What leaders remain in the back of the room because they cannot summon the courage and hope to keep trying after early defeats? What loving hearts stay locked up in loneliness rather than risk opening up after experiencing betrayal or bereavement? What great novel or music remains unwritten because the author cannot face another round of rejection slips?
But sometimes the most important moments in the human story do not happen on center stage, nor are they captured on YouTube. Some of the greatest human stories are not played out in front of thousands of adoring fans, nor affirmed by thunderous applause. For example, the patient caregiver who tirelessly tends the physical and emotional needs of a single bedfast patient or family member. It is the priest who serves for a lifetime in a small village, preaching to less than ten people at Mass, shepherding his tiny flock through the years with steady and faithful service in the name of Christ. Or the person with meager resources who nonetheless opens their heart and their wallet to share with another person even less fortunate than they are, or who drops in a single coin as the offering plate passes by in church—a tiny drop in a vast sea of need, infinitesimal compared to larger gifts from those who give much more, but who sacrifice much less. Yes, these are the silent, anonymous champions of the human spirit. Upon their faithfulness the world turns, and the Kingdom of God advances.
Our Old Testament and Gospel lessons tell the stories of two unlikely champions, both widows, both of whom were heroes of faith and generosity who would have played their roles in anonymity, unknown and forgotten by history, were it not for the recording of their stories in the pages of scripture. In Biblical times, widows were at the very bottom of the socio-economic ladder. In a world where a woman’s status was tied to her father or to her husband, a widow was left with little opportunity for protection, or provision. There were virtually no honorable or decent-paying jobs for single women. As a result, widows were usually poor, marginalized, and vulnerable to be used and abused by the more powerful in society. So it is not an incidental detail that the scripture tells the story of two widows, women who were heroic champions of faith, upon whose generosity the Biblical story advances. They offer generosity precisely where we would least expect to see it. They are both unlikely heroes, indeed.

The widow in the story from 1 Kings was even more unlikely because she was a gentile. Elijah had fled Israel during the terrible
drought, and the threat to his life, during the reign of the evil queen Jezebel. And so God provided for Elijah in unusual ways while he was in self-imposed exile from his homeland. Sometimes it was ravens that brought Elijah food. But in this instance, God provided for the prophet through the unlikely provision of a widow who was down to her last meal—literally. And yet Elijah approached this stranger, and invited this gentile, this desperately poor woman, to share what little she had left with him, and to trust that if she did God would keep refilling her empty cupboard, day by day. Isn’t it amazing that she said “yes” to that audacious request? **She did.** And sure enough, each day for an entire year, as she emptied her flour jar for that day’s meal, God would refill it by the next day. Notice that God did not give her the entire year’s worth of flour on the first day. It was more like the gift of manna to the Israelites in the wilderness. God wanted her, and us, to learn to trust Him for our daily bread, and our daily life. Of course, we would rather trust ourselves, our 401K’s, and our own ingenuity, wouldn’t we? But not this widow. She took the leap of faith, and expressed her faith through the extension of generosity, every single day for a year. No
wonder even Jesus told her story. She is a hero, a model of faith for us all. Even if a most unlikely one.

In Saint Mark’s Gospel, as the clock was winding down during Holy Week, while Jesus was watching people drop their offerings for the Temple, he pointed out the remarkable faith and generosity of an unnamed widow who waited patiently in line among the wealthier donors. When her time came, she dropped in two small copper coins, worth very little compared to the larger gifts offered by most of the others in that line. As far as we know, she didn’t even know Jesus was watching her. But Jesus knew that those two coins represented her entire net worth. It was all the money she had. What in this world, or perhaps, what beyond this world, would cause this poor widow to give everything she had left as an offering at the Temple? Well, Jesus noticed. As he said to his surprised disciples, her gift was the largest one given, because “she gave her very life.” It was the same thing Jesus would do later that week on the cross. Making it two times in a single week that all heaven was hushed in awe in light of it.
Does the world always take notice of these heroes? No. But it doesn’t matter. For they play out their roles for an audience of One. And He notices. God notices. And that is enough.