

**25 Pentecost
November 11, 2018**

**In the name of the God of all creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

Every year about this time one of the selections included in our lectionary has something to do with money. In one of the years of the three-year rotation there is the story of the Pharisees trying to catch Jesus in a gotcha moment. Jesus is presented with a coin with the impression of the emperor on it. He is asked whether people should pay their taxes. Jesus says "Give to Caesar's what is Caesar's, and give to God what belongs to God."

Then, in another year, there is the story of the humble tax collector and the proud Pharisee praying at the Temple. In Jesus' eyes the humble but despised tax collector is the more faithful of the two because he gives his tithe from his heart.

And then, of course, there is the story we just heard. The "Widow's Mite" is a classic Gospel story ... a go-to narrative for a Stewardship sermon. Who hasn't heard the moving account of the widow who slips quietly into the Temple, drops her meager offering into the treasury, and slips away? Who of you hasn't squirmed when a well-meaning clergy ... including me ... brings the story to its inevitable rhetorical question, "How then shall we live?" The moralistic answer is: "If a desperately poor widow can give her sacrificial bit, how much more should we ... so comfortably wealthy by comparison ... give out of our abundance to further our work in this corner of God's vineyard?"

We hear these stories this time of year because of the wisdom of those powers-that-be who decided on the lectionary. They understood that it was usually in the fall that annual budgets for the coming year were being discussed by vestries and mission boards, and the annual stewardship campaign needed a good story to get things going. Well, I'm not going to preach a stewardship sermon this morning ... at least not that kind of stewardship sermon. It will have to wait for a week or two. However, this story of the Widow's Mite is worth looking at for its own sake.

In the Jewish tradition there is a term "tzedakah" which literally means "righteousness" or "justice" but is most often translated as "charity." Many Jewish homes will have a tzedakah box in which to put money. Sometimes it may be nothing more than depositing spare change like in a piggy bank ... but since pork is not kosher you don't find many Jewish homes with piggy banks. Most often, people contribute to a tzedakah box in thanksgiving for a blessing, or in remembrance of a moment of joy, or when they see the suffering of others and have no other way to help them. When full, the contents of the tzedakah box are given to some charity, or to the local synagogue or temple to be distributed to others in need.

And tzedakah boxes come in all sizes. Those of you have been to Temple Bet Yam, may have seen a rather large and nicely decorated tzedakah box in their vestibule area. Now, I imagine that it was just such a tzedakah box that Jesus was observing when he saw the poor widow deposit the two coins in the story we just heard. In the time of Jesus there was a Temple tax for those who used the services of the Temple, but this story isn't about the Temple tax ... it is about voluntary giving ... an act of charity in thanksgiving for blessings.

The story is rather straight-forward. Jesus is criticizing those who wear fine robes, and seek the best seats in the Temple and at banquets, and those who exploit and steal from the estates of widows, while making spectacles of themselves by saying long prayers. And then, of course, there were the wealthy who were making large contributions at the Temple. Jesus said about the widow as she left the Temple that day: "She out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

As far as I can tell from reading the Gospels, Jesus wasn't often ... if at all ... given to exaggeration. If he says the woman gave everything she had, well, she gave everything she had. We know she was a widow in first century Palestine, a woman living on the margins of her society. She had no safety net. No husband to advocate for her, no pension to draw from, no social status to hide behind. She was impoverished and vulnerable in every single way that mattered. Two pennies short of the end.

Yet Jesus praises a poor widow who gives all she has ... a true gift of sincere charity. That Mark chose to tell this story about Jesus and a disenfranchised woman in a male dominated society is telling in itself, and that she is the one to show true, sincere charity instead of the showy, self-serving donations given by the more wealthy emphasizes the point. I'm troubled by this story, and here is why: what does it mean to applaud a destitute woman who gave her last two cents to the Temple, before slipping away to starve? Is this really a story of selflessness? Or is it a cautionary tale about naiveté? Why on earth would Jesus turn around and praise a woman for endangering her already tenuous life to support an institution he considered corrupt?

The simple answer is, he doesn't. If we read the story carefully ... Jesus does not "praise" the woman. Centuries of stewardship sermons notwithstanding, Jesus never commends the widow, applauds her self-sacrifice, or invites us to follow in her footsteps. He simply "notices" her, and tells his disciples to "notice her" as well.

This is a moment in the story when I'd give anything to have a video recording of what really transpired. I would love to hear Jesus's tone of voice, and to see the expression on his face. Is he heartbroken as he tells his disciples to peel their eyes away from the rich folks and glance in her direction instead? Is he outraged? Is he resigned? Does he tell one of his friends to run after the woman and give her a loaf of bread, a drink of water, or invite her to share a meal with them? What does it mean to Jesus, mere seconds after he's described the Temple leaders as devourers of widows' houses, to witness just such a widow being devoured? And worse, participating in her own devouring?

Should we cheer or weep in the face of this story? Or ... here's a third alternative ... should we call out ... as Jesus did ... any form of religious expression that manipulates the vulnerable into self-harm and self-destruction? Any form of piety that gives priority to long-winded prayers over works of compassion and liberation? Any version of Christianity that somehow promotes soul-killing suffering as somehow being redemptive? Any practice of faith that allows us to live in a state of apathy in the face of economic, racial, sexual, and political injustice? Is Jesus pointing out that the religious system of his day manipulates vulnerable people for the sake of those that are higher up in the system? If so, is that still true today? I think we all know the answer.

Jesus noticed the widow. He saw what everyone else was 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 were ever on the small, the insignificant, the unloved, and the hidden. Jesus saw beyond the trees and could see the forest ... he understood the bigger picture.

So, what exactly was it that Jesus noticed? I don't know for sure, but I'll hazard some guesses. First, I think he noticed the widow's courage. I imagine it took quite a bit of courage for her to make her "insignificant" 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, desperation, and the entirely human desire to cling to life no matter what ... and then face the consequences with hope.

I also feel Jesus noticed her dignity. Surely, she had to steel herself when widowhood rendered her worthless ... a person marked "expendable" even by the Temple she loved. And, 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. In her astonishing generosity, Jesus recognized a kind of power: those two coins were her gestures of defiance. They marked her subversive resistance to dehumanization.

And finally, I think Jesus noticed in her a deep calling. 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. Without speaking a word, she spoke God's Word in the ancient tradition of Isaiah, Elijah, Jeremiah, and other Old Testament prophets.

But she was also prophetic in the Messianic sense, because her self-sacrifice prefigured Jesus's self-sacrifice. She gave up everything that supported her life in the face of the unjust system that exploited her. Perhaps what Jesus noticed was kinship. Her story mirroring his. The widow gave everything she had to serve a world so broken at the risk of it killing her. Days later, Jesus gave everything he had to redeem, restore, and renew that world.

I believe that one of the points Jesus is making is that the real value of a gift is not to the one receiving it, but rather to the person making the gift, and in this case a gift of two copper coins may be much more valuable to the spirit of the poor widow than a gift of 100 drachmas for a wealthy landowner. That is the point of the tzedakah box ... it is not the amount in the box that

makes the difference. Rather, it is the spirit that both encourages the donation and is rewarded by its blessing.

That is the true meaning of faithful stewardship. We have been given our lives as blessed children of God and we are given the opportunity to give back. Stewardship is how we order our lives, share our talents and resources, respond to our joys and blessings, and live with empathy and compassion towards others in need. And, true stewardship has abundant and deep spiritual rewards.

Yes, this is a stewardship sermon, just not one that talks about funding our annual operating budget ... I'll do that one in a week or two. This is a stewardship sermon about spirit, courage, dignity, and prophetic calling. It is about how we choose to live our lives ... especially in those moments of vulnerability.

Amen.