

Pentecost XXIV - Proper 27 - November 8, 2015

Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17

Psalm 127

Hebrews 9:24-28

Mark 12:38-44

1/16th of a Sparrow

A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Port Townsend, WA.

We don't know much about the widow in today's Gospel lesson. We don't know if she is a young woman or whether she is advanced in years. We don't know how long it has been since her husband died, or how he died, how long they were married, or the quality of the marriage. We do know is that widows in the ancient world had little status and were nearly defenseless legally and financially. A woman of means would have had a pious man appointed to oversee her affairs, many of the overseers who may have likely benefitted from using the widow's assets for their own gain... but maybe not. A woman of little means would likely have had to fend for herself.

In today's gospel lesson Jesus has had a long day of teaching. He has made it to Jerusalem and his time is growing short. His own death is on the horizon. Here, at the temple, Jesus is clearly condemning the temple authorities for "devouring the homes of widows" while appearing pious in their attention to public prayer. Though we don't know much about the widow in the story. We do know is that she is extremely poor, so poor that without fanfare she opens her hand to release two small copper coins into the treasury box...coins that together are worth a penny, or a "mite" as a penny is called in the King James Version of the Bible. In ancient Hebrew and Greek, the coins were known as "two leptons." the Greek root "leptos" meaning slight, slender, or delicate... the lepton was the very smallest of coins. The word "lepton" is used in modern physics to describe some of the smallest elementary particles known such as electrons and neutrinos. And let us consider the value, in her day, of the two leptons the widow gave to the treasury... 128 leptons was equal to a single day's pay for a common laborer. Imagining an eight-hour work day, with a wage of 128 leptons... doing the calculation we come up with an hourly wage of 16 leptons. The widow gave two leptons, an equivalent of 7.5 minutes of wage work....the equivalent of 1/16th of the purchase price of sparrow.... a sparrow being the most inexpensive creature to offer as a sacrifice... the widow's gift was worth a scant fraction of a sparrow... That is all she had, all she had to live on, and that is what she gave. The widow's offering would have made a whisper of a sound as it went into the box in comparison with the symphony of jingles and rattles made by of the large amounts of coins deposited by the rich. As Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, after having taught in the temple... and having criticizing the scribes who dress opulently, have places of prestige in the synagogues, at banquets, and in society in general... and who "devour widows' houses"... Jesus notices the faint but profound gesture of the widow... lifting up this scene of stark contrasts for examination.

Too often the story of the widow giving every last coin in her possession, all that she had to live, has been used to encourage ever more and deeper sacrificial giving in stewardship season, maybe to add a pinch of guilt. If Jesus is holding up the widow's gift as an example, then we, too, should give...even our very last penny... with faith and confidence that God will provide. Is that what is being we are to learn from this story? Maybe Jesus is lifting up this scene at the treasury to highlight a sharp contrast between the humble generosity of a poor woman, and the poverty of an unjust and corrupt

temple system. The poor would not have been forced to give. The widow chose to give, maybe with a belief in the goodness of the institution and of its leaders, or maybe because she thought that this was the one institution that was mandated to care for the widow and the orphan, whether the leaders of the temple did so or not. There was no guarantee that the scribes would use the money to help orphans and widows. In Matthew's gospel we hear of a young man who asks Jesus what it would take for him to obtain eternal life. Jesus tells the man, who is not described as being either rich or poor, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possession, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then, come follow me." Jesus tells the young man to let go of all that is binding him in his earthly existence... let go of his earthly possessions... give the money to the poor... and follow the way of Jesus. This is the gospel definition of true wealth. The young man could not let go. He was bound by his possessions and the way of life that he knew. He couldn't begin to imagine another way and so he turned around and returned to the security and sameness of his old life.

We don't know what happens to the widow in this story. She gave everything she had to live on. We don't know if the temple helped her, or if members of the community outside of the religious system helped her. One commentary reflects on the possibility that the widow might well have died shortly after this scene.

But in this 12th chapter of Mark, just before today's lesson, Jesus is engaged in a conversation with some scribes in the temple who had just heard Jesus arguing with some sadducees.

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' ²⁹Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you 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." ³¹The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.' ³²Then the scribe said to him, 'You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that "he is one, and besides him there is no other"; ³³and "to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength", and "to love one's neighbour as oneself",—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.' ³⁴When Jesus saw that [the scribe] answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' After that no one dared to ask him any question.

The whole temple system was not corrupt... the scribe who answered Jesus wisely knew that the truest offering to God is about loving God completely, and to love our neighbors as God would have us do. My favorite line in one of our Eucharistic prayers from Rite I reads, "and here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonably holy, and living sacrifice unto thee..." This is the greatest offering to God, the whole of ourselves. The widow did not become poor, by earthly standards, by giving the last pittance of her possessions. She was already dirt poor and living on the fringes of society. Those with means and status focused not on God, but on maintaining their positions and growing their earthly wealth.

In our society too often the poor are portrayed as being ones who drain unearned resources by living off the success of others. Some American success stories are of the "rags to riches" variety but they are more the exception than the rule. The majority of American success stories have a foundation of some sort of familial financial support and security in which hand to mouth survival is unknown. In our time, and in opposition to the cacophony of political rhetoric in our midst, the Gospel is challenging us to let go of our judgment of the poor, and of the rich for that matter, and to imagine a better way...

for all people... We must loosen our tightly held grip on an unjust vision of comfort and security that not only stifles possibilities for more abundant life in Christ, a tightly held grip that does not welcome God's reign and hope for all people to take root and thrive in our midst.

In today's reading from Mark's account of the Good News Jesus is offering some of his final teachings... Jesus is nearing the end of his life trajectory that will soon lead him to death on the cross. It is at this point in the story that we witness the poor widow giving of her last lepton. The preacher Barbara Brown Taylor has written about this Gospel moment:

When (Jesus) leaves the temple with his disciples that day, his public ministry is over. In four days he will be dead, having uncurled his fingers from around his own offering, to give up the two copper coins of his life. (The widow) reminded him of someone. It was the end for her; it was the end for him, too. She gave her living to a corrupt church; he was about to give his life for a corrupt world. She withheld nothing from God; neither did he. It took one to know one. When he looked at her it was like looking in a mirror at a reflection so clear that he called his disciples over to see. "Look," he said to those who meant to follow him. "That is what I have been talking about. Look at her." ¹

The theologian Frederick Beuchner wrote: "We find by losing. We hold fast by letting go. We become something new by ceasing to be something old." To follow Jesus we are to let go of our old, entrenched ways of being individuals...to let go of our hunger for earthly wealth.... to recognize our place in unjust systems that oppress the poor...to loosen and let go, as best we can, our participation in unjust systems... and to open the whole of our lives to follow a better way... the way of new and truly abundant life, both as individuals and as a larger people of God.

I would like to end by sharing words of our new Presiding Bishop Michael Curry:

God came among us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth to show us the Way. He came to show us the Way to life... the Way to love. He came to show us the Way beyond what often can be the nightmares of our own devisings and into the dream of God's intending. That's why, when Jesus called his first followers he did it with the simple words "Follow me." ... Follow me and I will help you change the world from the nightmare it often is into the dream that God intends.

The story of the Widow's Mite lifts up for us, not a simple example of how we should give every last penny and possession... though the challenge and opportunity is always there before us..., the story has layers of challenge... to know deeper compassion, to look inside at the poverty of our own clinging and tight fistedness and sense of false comfort... a challenge to speak out and take actions to bring health to unhealthy and unjust systems that continue to oppress the weak and the poor... and to lift up the dignity of quiet and simple acts of generosity, acts that too often go undetected amidst earthly boasting about success and wealth measured in dollars and cents. Our truest gift to God is to offer the whole of ourselves... to follow the Way of Jesus... to live in to true Gospel abundance. The challenge is to recognize this better way and then to unclench and let go into this better way... following the path to true success and prosperity... for the sake of true abundance and fullness of life.

In Jesus' name...

Amen...

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor from *The Preaching Life*.