

1 Kings 17:8-16

Psalm 146

Hebrews 9:24-28

Mark 12:38-44

A SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND ALISTAIR SO, S.O.SC., RECTOR OF ALL HALLOWS PARISH, SOUTH RIVER, IN THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF MARYLAND, ON THE TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, NOVEMBER 8, 2015.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

In *Lord of the Flies*, a famous novel by Nobel-winning British author, William Golding, we learn something about the problem of evil. In World War II, an airplane evacuating a group of British school boys is shot down over an isolated tropical island. The boys are left to fend for themselves. Two of the boys, Ralph and Piggy, discover a conch shell on the beach, and Piggy realizes it could be used as a horn to summon the other boys. Once assembled, the boys set about electing a leader and devising a way to be rescued. They choose Ralph as their leader, and Ralph appoints another boy, Jack, to be in charge of the boys who will hunt food for the entire group.

But over time, infighting happens as Ralph and Jack struggle for power. Some of the younger boys (the *littluns*) also become scared of a perceived monster on the island. Jack capitalizes on that fear by claiming to be committed to killing the monster. He declares himself the leader of the new tribe of hunters and organizes a hunt and a violent, ritual slaughter of a wild pig to solemnize the occasion. The hunters then decapitate the wild pig and place its head on a sharpened stake in the jungle as an offering to the monster. Later, encountering the bloody, fly-covered head, a boy named Simon has a terrible vision, during which it seems to him that the head is speaking. The voice, which he imagines as belonging to the Lord of the Flies, says that Simon will never escape him, for he exists within all people.¹

Upon waking, Simon realizes that the monster is not external but lives in every boy. We all have the potential to do good things, as well as the potential to sin. In a way, the *Lord of the Flies* is the story of the Fall at the Garden of Eden retold and repackaged. When left to our

¹ SparkNotes Editors. "SparkNote on Lord of the Flies." SparkNotes.com. SparkNotes LLC. 2007. Web. 23 Oct. 2015.

own devices, without law, restraints, and the fear of God, the human proclivity toward evil can easily rear its ugly head. Our innocence may be replaced by savagery.

The Christian religion offers a solution to break from this cycle of sin and evil. As much as we all want to help ourselves and save ourselves, we simply are not able to do it alone. We need a Savior.

John 3:16 - For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.

Our scriptural lessons today point us to one quality that is necessary if we want to break the cycle of evil and attain fullness of life. That quality is the spirit of generosity. Jesus uses two examples to show us what generosity that comes from the heart looks like. The first story contrasts the giving habits of the scribes and that of a widow. The scribes like to draw attention to themselves when they give. In the temple, there are trumpet-shaped bronze receptacles for the offerings. Money is in the form of copper coins. The scribes like to make a huge noise when they give.

But when the widow comes forth to give, one can barely hear the sound of two copper coins hitting the receptacle. Despite her lack of means, the widow participates in giving. And Jesus praises her for her genuine piety and generosity.

Our normal and perhaps, logical, practice is to give proportionally within our means. We all have heard that one must make sure that one takes care of one's basic necessities before venturing out to give to charities and other causes. So, in this vein, shouldn't the widow hold onto her coins? Surely she has great needs herself. But the scriptures challenge us to examine what genuine generosity looks like. And this form of generosity can get a bit, shall we say, challenging, and perhaps, radical?!

In our lesson from **1 Kings**, God promises the starving prophet Elijah that he will not die of hunger. Instead, God will send a widow to feed him. On encountering the widow, Elijah first asks for water and then food. But the widow mentions that she hardly has enough for herself and her son in a jar of meal. This will be their last meal before they starve to death. But Elijah offers the seemingly absurd proposal: "Make some something for him to eat first before her son and herself." He also promises that,

"God will provide. You will not run of meal and oil."

How would you respond if you were the widow? Would you say that Elijah is crazy? Or would you take a leap of faith and trust that all will be well?

The widow chose the latter and God indeed provided. The text of 1 Kings does not provide us with a deep profile of the widow: whether or not she knew that all would turn out well ahead of time, we do not know. We are only shown that she was presented with a seemingly bizarre request in her dire straits. And the Spirit of God prevailed upon her, her son, and Elijah. And all three starving individuals were satisfied.

In The Episcopal Church, we generally are not biblical literalists. And if you don't believe that this story actually happened, it is absolutely fine. But I believe we can gain some important insight about generosity whether we take this story literally or metaphorically.

And that is the fact that authentic generosity is a matter of the heart. Authentic generosity is propelled by faith. And authentic generosity, ironically, does not count the cost.

Generosity can be risky, both in the case of the widow at the Temple, and the widow in Elijah's rescue story. But precisely because of the high risks involved in being truly generous, the rewards are also tremendously fulfilling — generosity connected the widows to the heart of God.

Generosity can save us from the curse of self-centeredness and our proclivity toward evil. That same openness of spirit can help the church and the world find creative solutions to a wide range of pressing issues we face today, whether it be evangelism, making a difference in people's lives, the refugee and migrant situation, and the changes in the fundamental climate patterns of our planet.

So, in this coming week and beyond, I invite you to prayerfully think about what practicing a renewed religious generosity means for you. How will our own lives change if we become more like the widows in our lessons? And how will it change the lives of others?

With God's help, may our generosity overcome the darkness and evil of this world!

Amen