

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 27) – Year B – November 8, 2009

Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17; Psalm 127; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

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As I was reading and praying with this week's Gospel lesson, it was tempting to look for a nice cozy story about how God blesses us in our giving as a soothing and comfortable illustration to Jesus' commendation of the poor widow's offering. Tempting that is for all of about thirty seconds, because there is little to soothe or comfort us in this week's reading from Mark, except perhaps for one thing. More on that later. In fact, if I had to describe the overarching emotion I associate with this reading, it is a kind of needling annoyance. It feels like being at a picnic where the yellow jackets keep dodging and swooping in, circling around and alighting here and there, despite all kinds of energetic arm swishing and swatting. If pressed to define this vague irritation, it circles on at least two levels. The first is how often I've heard this passage quoted in stewardship season as if the widow's giving was what we should all be doing. Then there is the reality of endemic economic injustice. There are times when it seems that we simply cannot give enough to make a real difference in the face of such gargantuan need. Especially so when our giving is more of a band aid that alleviates immediate need. All the while suspecting that the real problem is more akin to entrenched, longstanding malpractice requiring major surgery in order to realize a more just and equitable system.

As Jesus often does, He gives us two extremes or two sides of a story in order to make His point. The first half of the story concerns a general teaching against self-righteous pride and hypocrisy. The scribes are named because, as teachers of Torah, they should know better, but they are also representatives of the corrupt leadership of a doomed system. Corrupt because a major theme of the Hebrew Scriptures is caring for the poor and most vulnerable in society, particularly widows and orphans. For example, the prophet Zechariah (7:10) says this, "[D]o not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor..." And in the book of the prophet Isaiah (1:17) we read, "[L]earn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." It is a doomed system just as Jesus prophesies and history confirms, since the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD, marking the end of the second temple period. Mark's Gospel account was probably written around the time of the destruction of the Temple. We cannot underestimate the magnitude of the crisis amongst God's people following this event. As the center of worship, social aid, and the economic hub for the Judean community, the Temple was the heart and soul of all aspects of community life. Its destruction was a disaster of epic proportions. In the Gospel story that is still in the future. For the leaders of the Temple, the glory days are now.

Just imagine a peacock in full courtship mode, with tail feathers gloriously arrayed, strutting around an immaculately cared for garden to get a good idea what Jesus is talking about in his description of these Temple leaders. Not only did they like to dress well, but be admired for it in the marketplace. They wanted to be seen as pillars of the community, and honored for it with the best seats in the synagogue, and at social functions. Yet perhaps for Jesus, the worst of this behavior is a false heart offering prayers to God, simply to be seen as righteous in the eyes of the people. Jesus' condemnation of such behavior is on two levels. The first is the terrible hypocrisy behind their religiosity. On the one hand praying long and often without any change of heart or humility. Then, despite such long prayers, still despising God's commandments and "devouring widow's houses". Precisely the opposite of what they should have been doing. The second level of condemnation is implicit. Jesus comments on the scribes' desire for respect in the marketplaces. As we have seen before in Mark's Gospel, the author's words are carefully chosen. The marketplace is a common secular area, as opposed to the sacredness of the Temple. It is the spiritual equivalent of seeking the world's approval, rather than seeking the righteousness of God.

You and I don't need to look too hard to see that this system of the rich robbing the poor hasn't changed much in the last two thousand years. The methods are perhaps a little more subtle now, but no less harmful to those who have the least resources. What about the ever-increasing number of companies that now hire numerous part time workers so that they can avoid any obligation to offer health or dental benefits? Also, lending companies that quite legally offer cash advances on an upcoming paycheck using, and leading poor families into a black hole of indebtedness from which it is very hard to recover. There are many other examples. Human nature is such that we will generally not change a system from which we benefit. Globalization has compounded the problem, giving even greater leverage to wealthy corporations, at great cost to the poverty-stricken around the world. The U.S. and countries like her wield incredible power in world markets. With power comes great responsibility. Although in reality, we all know the truth of the saying coined by Lord Acton, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

However, there is some good news. As one of the largest consumer nations, you and I are not powerless in the struggle for justice, and the fight for equality. We have purchasing power, which includes our choice not to purchase goods from countries with a history of human rights violations, or at stores that treat their employees unfairly. Better yet, for the next two Sundays, The Church of Our Saviour is hosting our second annual Gift Fair. Buying fair trade goods promotes equitable wages, and labor practices. Charitable gifts make a real difference in the lives of the impoverished, including widows and orphans. We can also advocate on behalf of the marginalized of society, voting for those who promise to address the poverty gap, **and** holding them accountable to their promises. And we can pray daily for God's help to change our own hearts, and the hearts of our leaders to do all we can to promote justice and peace in the world.

God desires that all have sufficient. There is no dignity in poverty. The very fact that the poor are still amongst us, is an indictment of the church's failure to witness to a better way. So why does Jesus draw the widow's offering to the attention of the disciples? Is it really commendable to give every last penny to support a corrupt institution, especially one that was supposed to be supporting women just like this poor widow? There is nothing in Scripture that supports such a position. Jesus doesn't commend the widow for her offering, but He does say that her offering is more than all those who have given out of their abundance. Once again, Jesus' words are at two levels. There are the rich who contribute from their relative abundance, and then there is the poor widow who gives all she has to live on. However, the wealthy aristocracy of Jerusalem has largely become wealthy through exploitation of the peasant farmers, many of whom lost their lands to pay taxes to the elite landowners. It is just like the widow losing her home and her inheritance to the scheming scribes. However, what is commendable about the widow's offering in Jesus' eyes is her faith and trust in God. After all, she is giving to God and God's work in the world. And she is not holding anything back.

St. Augustine insisted that it is our duty to present ourselves – all of who we are – to God when we come to receive Holy Communion. Yet there is no reason to limit the giving of our whole self to God in any way. Earlier in Mark's Gospel, Jesus says, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mark 8:35). As followers of Christ, we are called to offer our whole self and our whole life to God in all things. The widow's giving in trust and faith of everything she has to live on foreshadows Jesus' giving of Himself on the cross. Offering is an act of being. It is one hundred percent personal. As such, we must ask ourselves what a difference you and I could make if we extend that same love and grace, hope and generosity of spirit in our own authentic acts of giving as a powerful witness to the world. Is our own faith-filled offering found in presenting all of who we are, and all we hope to become to God's service?

Amen.