

Sermon: Year B, Proper 27

Texts: I Kings 17:8-16

Mark 12:38-44

For many of us, the Gospel lesson we have just heard is probably a familiar story. It's message seems direct and, as suits our modern American mindset, practical -- especially during the stewardship season, when the easiest ploy is to find a convenient text about giving by which to coerce a more munificent response. What better image could be conjured than a poor widow offering everything she had for the operating budget of the temple? She had so little, and we -- all of us -- possess so much more. The implication, usually left unspoken, is that in comparison with her, we give so much less. And with this recognition, a gnawing sense of guilt will hopefully shame us into uncommon generosity. "Come here," said Jesus, "look at her." And ever since, there have been those who make sure we do just this, chiefly in order to pry open our wallets.

Allow me, then, to borrow some other words of Jesus: "It shall not be so with you." Our world is already skilled enough in enlisting guilt for its own purposes. There's no need for us as Christians to increase that burden. But more importantly, what this story actually invites us to see is not someone's last heroic sacrifice, which we are then urged to imitate. In contrast, what we are offered in her -- a widow who is never even given the dignity of a name -- is an example of a life lived with remarkable freedom. It's given to us as a simple observation, without a coinciding command. "Look," said Jesus. Just look. And the question, left open, is what did Jesus see in her? What did two copper coins in the hands of a poor woman represent?

In part, what she was doing was giving up exactly what the scribes so wanted for themselves, which was the status that is the usual measure of the world -- visible wealth and public stature. In the eyes of these others, she was no one: alone, dependent on the charity of extended family, having only a scrap of a life. Her contribution, however, was not just the meager remains of a sparse existence. It was her own rejection of the pity of others. By it, she announced that she was not limited to who they saw, a figure shriveled by misfortune. She was not defined by their condescension, and she was more than the vision of her suffering. Her two coins were not just a token; they signified the wealth of *her life*, which was a greater possession and a greater gift than the wealth of work or the fortune of circumstance. And she had the courage to acknowledge this as an unfettered gift, not subject to measure or comparison.

But even more dramatically, the heart of the matter was this: she gave witness to her knowing inclusion in a grace that exceeded the boundaries of her own self and the tight circle of her own concerns. Her contribution wasn't an exchange, a quid pro quo with God, as if a little cash might procure a little blessing. She wasn't buying anything. Her giving was, rather, an act of quiet rejoicing. Others, seeing her, saw the ravages of time's injuries. But she showed no signs of wanting or needing anything in return. Her standing before God was no less than anyone else's. What Jesus saw in her was a woman giving the kind of thanks that transcends evaluation: she was materially expressing her confidence that her whole life was secure in God. She had already invested herself in an intimacy with the divine that was not vulnerable to the anxiety of stature or

degree. It was complete and comprehensive, and therefore, she was free to be generous in life, even where her measure was smallest.

This story isn't about money, nor is it really about giving. It's about a deeper stewardship. What it offers us is the opportunity to claim the same intimacy with God for ourselves, the same perfect freedom that comes from realizing that God has irrevocably bound himself to us, which affords us a sense of richness that is inviolable, one that cannot be degraded by any standard set against us. This widow does not confront us with obligation. She opens for us a vision of blessedness that can't be surpassed -- for God's faithfulness to us extends all the way to the point where it seems most incongruous. Still, in her poverty, she had room enough for devotion; still, in her poverty, she had joy enough for adoration, love enough for generosity, and the desire to make her whole life an open expression of prayer. And in these ways, we have the opportunity to emulate her. Having breath, if that alone, we still have capacity for praise. In observing the Sabbath, we have the ability to show that there is still room enough in our lives for love. Hopefully, we haven't become so rich in other things that we are too poor to offer this.

And if you need some practical way to apply this text to your life, perhaps this might be your continuous exercise. In every place where a sense of ought arises, with its shadow of haunting guilt -- in every place -- interject instead the trust that you are actually free: free to be surprisingly gracious, free to offer each other abiding peace, free to show compassion to others regardless of their stature, high or low, and free to show something of God even where you feel you yourself are least impressive. For if we simply live into our own creed, then it just might be that what we elicit in others might be a response similar to Jesus': "Look," he said, with amazement. "Look at her." And what might our life together be like if we discovered others saying of us with the same amazement: "Look. Look at them."

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