

1 Kings 17: 8 – 16
Hebrews 9: 24 – 28
Mark 12: 38 – 44
24 Pentecost, Proper 27

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“Going All In”

My oldest brother learned to play poker in the Boy Scouts. He was part of a group of six young men who started playing poker during camp-outs. They met regularly for years – all the way through college – and, as they got older, the stakes got larger and larger. I remember my brother betting all of his summer earnings – the money he would need for college in the fall – on one poker hand. He bet the farm, bet his bottom dollar, bet his boots on that one hand of poker. He went all up, all in. Having been in the room that afternoon watching with rising horror, I have never bet like that in my entire life. I was cured of any desire to bet like that – certainly not in a card game. In case you are wondering, my brother went back to college that fall with money in hand because his crazy wild bluff worked.

How many of us, in any sphere of our lives, are willing to bet the farm on our beliefs? How many of us are willing to go all up, all in because we are certain of what we know or what we believe? Under what circumstances might we risk everything we have, everything we know, and everything we believe? Most of us hedge our bets. We hold back that rainy day dollar, that “get out of Dodge” money; we leave ourselves an escape route. Sometimes we temporize – “we’ll see” was my parents’ favorite phrase for saying no without saying no. Sometimes we obfuscate and throw up a word screen to avoid making a decision. Sometimes, we write memos, form study commissions, or hire consultants – always a favorite on Bainbridge Island. We are made very nervous about irreversible decisions. Everyone wants a life filled with unlimited do-overs. But there comes a time when

we do have to make a real decision – we have to hold ‘em or fold ‘em. There really are true decision points when the consequences are real, inescapable, and final. Sometimes we are called to go all in. The Way of Jesus is, at its core, about going all in – about betting the farm – keeping nothing back for another day. Jesus lived by putting everything on the line, all the time.

We see this in his acerbic commentary about the Temple scribes. Imagine the scene – Jesus is teaching in a corner of the Temple grounds watching all the officials going about their business – swanning around in fancy robes, looking very, very important. They all have reserved seats in the best and most prominent location in the Temple and they do go on and on in long prayers. They have job security, other resources, and yet they seek popularity more than righteousness. Thank goodness no one serving God in our day does that sort of thing! Well, I might look like one of those scribes, but really I am very modest and humble; but then I have much to be humble about.

Jesus is openly challenging the system that the scribes are part of. Jesus is challenging the “business as usual” notions about how the world works because Jesus is calling his disciples to a new way of being, a new kingdom that is remarkably opposite to the world He knew and lived in. And that world will, in the end, execute Him because it could not allow that view of a new way of being to stand.

But Jesus is also about far more than just reforming religious or government practice. Jesus is about reforming all of us. The Way of Jesus is about personal transformation, a radical shift in our understanding of the world, one that leads to a communal transformation for all of us.

Jesus is watching as the faithful come to make their offerings to the Temple. This is money for the operation of the Temple so we might understand that the scribes and all those who labor in the Temple have a lively interest in the amounts going into the collection jars. But these are free-will offerings made by faithful people to support their religious community. And we learn that many rich people put in large sums. How rich; how large a donation we don't know but clearly the obviously wealthy were not stingy with their gifts. But we are told of a poor widow – a term that names someone at the bottom of society for we know that widows were without power, sometimes without any security, and often abused and ignored. Such people don't have enough of anything to hold some back as a hedge on things doing wrong. And we should remember that poverty, in that time, was seen as God's judgment – poverty was a sign of God's dis-favor; God's turning away from a sinner. We, of course, in our modern times, have evolved beyond such notions, haven't we? None of us have ever blamed the poor for their parlous state, have we?

This poor widow openly makes her offering to the Temple and puts in two small copper coins. An insultingly small gift to the Temple of Solomon – hardly worth collecting; it is likely one of scribes didn't bother to record such a puny gift. But Jesus notes it carefully and declares that this tiny gift is more than all those other gifts given that day. For the widow gave out of her poverty, while the rich gave out of their abundance. Both parties gave gifts freely; both parties have shown their faithfulness; both parties seek to be righteous; both parties want to do God's will. So, what's wrong with giving out of abundance? Is there something unseemly in giving out of abundance? What is a wealthy person to do?

When we fall into the trap of thinking that wealth or poverty are signs of God's favor or dis-favor, we are in spiritual danger. We can end up looking the wrong way – we get caught up in the wrong debate, using the wrong language. Being wealthy does not make one righteous; being poor does not make one righteous. Being righteous, acting in trust and faith in God is what brings about righteousness. The widow trusts deeply in God; believes deeply in God's providence and blessing and thus offer all of her material wealth because she believes so deeply in a loving and caring God. She believed deeply enough to “put it all in.” She gives out of her material poverty because she is spiritually wealthy. The ones who gave out of their abundance, held back some of their material wealth because they thought it was theirs in their first place and because they hesitated to trust in God. They hedged their belief in God by trying to control their world through retaining some of their material wealth. They would not go “all in” even for God.

This is a hard teaching for us. We think we have to do it all for ourselves by ourselves. We don't really believe we will get help if we ask for help. And we fear owing others, losing our autonomy by accepting help from others. We think we have to be in control all the time. We see a dangerous world around us and question even kind and generous offers. We want to do it all by ourselves. But there is another strand within our culture that we can overlook or forget. Even in the midst of all our rampant individualism, there is deep commitment to helping others, to caring for others, for creating and sustaining organizations dedicated to support and assistance for those in need. This strand shows up in community organizations, in non-profit organizations, in countless quiet acts of love and support. We do understand that when we give out of our poverty – that sense that all that we have is a gift from God; that sense that our own abilities and skills are best used when we share and contribute to the larger community; that all of this

came from God – including ourselves – and that it will all go back to God in the end – then we can know the peace that came over that widow as she watched her two little coins slide into the collection plate. In so many ways, the greatest inner peace, the greatest satisfaction in life occurs when we put in everything we have into something bigger than we are.

When we spend it all, give it all – go all in, holding nothing back – then life takes on a special intensity and meaning. And the reason for that, I believe, is that when we act like that, we come as close as we can to what Christ Jesus did in his earthly ministry – Jesus put it all in, going all up, all in, holding nothing back, no reserve, no rainy day fund, no hidden stash; Jesus bet the farm on us. God bet it all – all of creation – on us. Foolish God, Loving God, Wonderful God. Amen.