

I Kings 17:8-16
Psalm 146
Hebrews 9:24-28
Mark 12:38-44

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Lessons From Widows

A couple of weeks ago, someone commented that she wished politics didn't come up in church. "We come here for respite," she said. Once, when I invited someone to come onto the vestry, she said "I don't know, I like to come to church to rest, and you always ask us to do stuff!" I did remind her that I was pretty sure it was Jesus asking us to do stuff, and that I was just the mouthpiece...

I know it's true that we come to church to rest in God, to bask in the love we feel in this place, to hear comfortable and comforting words of love and blessing, to take Jesus in, in the sacrament of bread and wine, to be given strength for the journey to go out into the world to do the work God has given us to do. But I will tell you, it seems I've done little since last Wednesday other than engage the conversations you have needed and wanted to have about the election, an election that was surely political. And while all that is difficult to hold, I'm so happy that you want your faith and your place in Christian community to inform that part of your life too.

I think a lot of us are here today looking for some respite, because we've been living in a divisive time, a frightening time, and for some, a devastating time. No matter how any of us feel about the election's outcome, most all of us are thinking about what kind of world we want to live in, about how to serve the vulnerable, how to protect the planet, how to feed people who are starving, how to help the victims of war. And we're thinking about these things much more intensely and intentionally right now. I am trying to hold all of this with you and to remind you that God is still the God of everything and that love and listening and learning, doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly, are the best ways forward regardless of who is in office. Yes, there is work to be done, but right now, I think it's time to rest and refresh, in order to prepare for the work ahead. And at the risk of sounding simplistic, we need to hold hope, resist the temptation to despair, stay connected to Christian community and trust that God is in all of this. As the psalmist says, *For my part, I will put my trust in the Lord.*

One of the many gifts the widows in our readings today have to offer us in this uncertain time, is the reminder that we really can trust in God, even, or perhaps especially when we're afraid. Their trust in God overcame all fear and allowed them to be generous. Fear makes it almost impossible for us to be generous or to show love. When the prophet Elijah came to the widow at Zarephath, she was ready to have one last meal with her son and then die. But the word of God came to her through Elijah and she trusted. She didn't feed the last of her cakes to her son, instead she fed the prophet, who promised her that God would provide. That had to have taken a lot of trust. And the widow who gave her last two coins had to have trusted in God's provision too. She gave everything she had.

We need to be a little bit careful with the story of the widow and her two coins. While it is an important story about how trusting God with all the parts of our lives leads to a life of generosity, it's important to recognize that this widow is living within a religious and social system that takes every last penny from the poor and rewards only the rich. It can be tempting to idolize this sacrificially giving widow rather than do the work of dismantling the social structure that has oppressed and impoverished her and so many like her. It can also be tempting to criticize the rich people for not doing enough rather than thank them for what they have done. It can be tempting to judge. Let's not do those things as we explore this story.

The widow who put two teeny tiny coins into the temple treasury is the one Jesus had his eye on and the one he invites us to watch too. He did point out that she put all her money into the church coffers, but there's more to the story than the money. There always is. I think Jesus wants us to watch this widow because she refused to be forced out of her temple, whether or not it was corrupt. I think he wants us to watch her because she knew she had a rightful place in the company of all of God's people, regardless of her gender, her age, her social status or her economic circumstances. In her dignity, she gave all that she had, which doesn't just mean money. A careful scripture translation tells us that she gave her very life. I think that is what Jesus is inviting us to look at. I think he's asking us to see in that widow, the devotion, beauty, dignity, belonging and belovedness of everyone, especially the ones we're least likely to notice. I think he's asking us to see that we may have more to learn from the people who aren't like us, than we do from the people who are.

And so in the midst of the rich people's coins crashing into the coffers and the sounds of the trumpet blast telling God and everybody who gave the most, Jesus says: *Look. Look over there. See that woman? Pay attention to her. See her circumstances, see her dignity, see her unselfconsciousness, see her sacrifice, see her trust, see her devotion, see her.* This seemingly poor woman who gave her everything to God, was giving back what God had given her at the very deepest level. Love. Trust. Attention. Money. Everything she had. Her whole life. In complete trust and seemingly without the slightest fear that creates that sense of scarcity, she offered the last of the money she had, giving up control over her resources and trusting completely in God. I don't imagine it was the first time she'd done it. It's surprising how people who have little in the way of material things are so profoundly generous with whatever they do have. To the ones who have plenty but still worry about having enough, this seems crazy. Yet this is the nature of generous and trusting Spirits.

You see the real meaning of sacrifice is to make sacred, to set something we deeply value apart as an offering, an act of worship to God. That isn't what we typically think of when we hear the word sacrifice. For those of us who have plenty, sacrifice often implies giving up more than we think we ought to. But this widow, AND the widow of Zerapath - women who were the poorest of the poor and the lowliest of the lowly - would not be dissuaded from giving all that they had. The tiny coins made hardly a sound when they dropped into the coffers, and still, those tiny coins were unquestionably sacred. The handful of meal made only one small cake, but that little

handful was holy. The tiny coins, the little cake were sacrificial offerings... offerings of themselves, their faith, their dignity, their belovedness, all made sacred by the God who loved them, the God in whom they put their trust. Their offerings symbolized their faith AND their recognition that their faith had to be lived out in ways that were tangible and incarnational.

Their giving was neither rote nor ritualistic, it couldn't have been and still have been sacred. Such giving was pondered and prayed over, and that sort of giving transforms lives. As it turns out, when we give sacrificially, we are always, always changed.

I once sat on the board of non-profit foundation that was developed to complete a particular task. Having completed the work, it was time for the organization to disband, and we had the happy circumstance of being left with a lot of money. It was decided that each board member would take responsibility for donating something close to \$10,000 to the non-profit of their choosing. This was a time in my life when I thought I couldn't afford to donate \$100, let alone \$10,000. It felt like a huge responsibility. It felt like an onerous task. I set it aside for a long time. Until I didn't. There came a point when I realized what a profound privilege it was to be able to give so much money away, and when I finally wrote the check, it was thrilling! I was filled with more joy and humility than I could ever have imagined. It didn't matter that it wasn't my money, it really didn't. I don't say that to be flippant, I say that with more gratitude than you can possibly imagine. That money was put into my care and I got to give it away. And in time I came to understand that to be true of all the money that passes through my hands. None of it is mine. It all belongs to God. And every penny I have given away since that time, represents the faith filled offering of all that God has given me and all the ways I hope to be a part of God's goodness in the world. When our giving is sacrificial – made sacred in the act of devotion to God, we help to usher in God's kingdom.

“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.” I don't see this as Jesus' indictment of the rich or his glamorization of the poor. It was his way of teaching us that it isn't the size of the offering, but it's sacrificial nature that matters because the sacrificing is what transforms us.

This isn't a story that says 2 cents is worth more than fifty thousand dollars, if the fifty thousand dollars is a sacrificial gift. But it is a story that says those gifts are of equal value when they are both given sacrificially. Jesus is inviting us into the deep peace and unspeakable joy of trusting in God to the point that the whole of our lives becomes a living sacrifice, and all of it given for the life of God's beloved, beautiful and broken world. Amen