

Sunday, November 11, 2018
25th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 27 (Year B)

1 Kings 17.8-16; Mark 12.38-44

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In our lectionary readings for today, we have the tale of two widows. Two women, separated by 900 years, 120 miles, and by cultural backgrounds and religious beliefs. The only similarities are that they are both widowed with extremely limited resources. Yet, despite all that separates these two women, they are soul sisters.

The first, as we heard in today's Old Testament reading, is the Widow of Zarephath. She lived during the mid-9th century BC in Phoenicia—in what we now know as Lebanon. We know virtually nothing about her, other than what we hear in a portion of the book of First Kings. She is widowed and has a son. Given where she lives, she probably worships Baal or one of the many other gods worshiped by the Phoenicians. What we hear of her takes place during a time of severe drought. She has used up all her resources and now only has a small amount of meal and oil left. She intends to use the last of these provisions to make a final meal for herself and her son, and then wait for death to come. As she prepares to do just that, she has an encounter with the Jewish prophet Elijah, who is in Phoenicia on a mission to demonstrate the sovereignty of the Jewish God even in the land of Baal. Elijah manages to convince the widow to share her meager resources with him, promising "For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth" (1 Kings 17.14). The widow believes in God's promise and does as Elijah asks.

We hear of the other woman, the Widow of Jerusalem—of the Widow's Mite fame—in our Gospel reading from Mark. Even less is known about her. All we know is that she was a widowed Jewish woman who is destitute. She only has two small copper coins, worth a penny. What amounts to one sixty-fourth of a day's wages for a common laborer, worth about \$1.38 at today's minimum wages. And rather than save some of her meager resources for herself to buy food, she gives it all to the temple treasury. All of it! Leaving her absolutely nothing to live on.

By our standards, both widows' actions are questionable. At least on the face of it. They both foolishly give away their last means of support, leaving them at risk. So why do it?

Faith. Both women act out of profound faith. The Widow of Zarephath going on faith in the word of the prophet of some foreign god that she would be blessed and provided for. And we know that is precisely what happened. We are told that "she as well as [Elijah] and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah" (1 Kings 17.15-16). And we know from what follows that her life and that of her son are transformed by her act of faith. In the part of the story following today's lesson, the woman's son falls gravely ill and dies. Because of her faith, Elijah prays to God to restore the boy's life. And God does, thereby solidifying the woman's faith in this foreign God.

As for the Widow of Jerusalem, who gave all her money to the temple, we don't know her fate. We would like to think that somehow she is blessed because of her faith, as well. But we just don't know. And perhaps that isn't the point of the story. The point of the story is that she is so devout in her faith and trust in her God that she is willing to look beyond her own needs and concerns and to give out of her poverty, giving all that she has to live on, out of love and obedience to God. Giving all she has because she recognizes that everything she has comes from God. Trusting that her ongoing needs will be met. That, just maybe, the temple might come through, fulfilling God's command to care for widows such as her.

While not necessarily satisfying to our sensibilities—we would like to know that she was indeed taken care of and lived happily ever after—the point just might be that the results of our faith are precisely that. Uncertain. We don't know what God is going to do with our lives when we give them over to him. That's what faith is all about. Trusting, without proof or certainty, that in giving ourselves to God, he will bless us for our obedience and care for us out of our need. Or for that matter, that God will bless us just because he loves us.

This is the common theme of our two widows. What makes them soul sisters, kindred spirits. They were both willing, against all hope, to give completely of what they had out of faith. And while this was demonstrated through the giving of their resources—meal and oil, a couple of copper coins—it is not about giving “stuff.” It is about giving of self. It is about giving one's whole self to God. Even when—maybe particularly when—it might seem like a foolish thing to do. When we have absolutely no clue what will come of our apparent foolishness.

That is the scary thing about faith. There are no certainties. All we can do, by definition, is trust what we know about God. That God is all-loving, all-merciful, all-giving, and that our needs will be met precisely because we put our trust in him. And scripture demonstrates time and again that this is indeed the case.

If there is one thing I have learned in my journey toward becoming a priest and in my twelve and a half years of ordained ministry, is to have faith in God. Not that I didn't have faith before. Otherwise I wouldn't have been willing or able to give my life to God in this particular way. But God has proved to me time and again that if I just have faith in what he is doing, I will be taken care. Things will be okay.

There have been various times in my life when I have felt like a kindred spirit to these two women—to the Widow of Zarephath and the Widow of Jerusalem. When I have not known what I was going to do, how I was going to survive. When I have been brought to that point of saying in desperation, “okay God, it's in your hands.”

One of those times ended with me being brought to St. Gregory's. As many of you know, my last position was as priest-in-charge at St. Paul's Episcopal and Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Santa Paula. A very small congregation. Our entire Sunday attendance was about the size of our average 8:00 service. Actually, a little smaller. I had been sent to St. Paul's Emmanuel to evaluate the parish and determine its viability. From the beginning, it was apparent to me that the parish did not need, nor could they afford, a full-time priest. So my job was to get the congregation to the point where they were able to transition to part-time clergy leadership.

Essentially, my job was to work myself out of a job. It took me three years, but I finally got them to realize and to accept that things had to change and that I was not the one to continue with them on their journey.

As they slowly grew into their new reality, I became increasingly anxious. St. Paul's Emmanuel was running out of money. We had depleted our meager financial reserves. None of the positions I applied for were panning out. The rent on my apartment in Ventura was going up and up, rapidly reaching a point where I could not afford to live there on a full-time salary, let alone on a part-time salary, if it came to that. The Vestry graciously agreed to keep me on full-time as long as they could or until I got a new job, whichever came first. I was starting to think about alternatives, just in case. Possibly continue at St. Paul's Emmanuel part-time, at least for as long as my savings held out. Possibly put all my worldly possessions in storage and move back to my parents' home until I could find a new job. None of my options were particularly appealing. Rather than give up or sink into despair, I knew I had to continue to be faithful. God had called me into this life. He would not have done that just to let me languish and become destitute. If God had enough faith in me to call me into ministry, I needed to have enough faith in him to lead me to whatever came next.

And that's about the time that I received the call to become your Rector. And like the Widow of Zarephath, and hopefully like the Widow of Jerusalem, my faithfulness paid off. In my continued faithfulness to God—which was not always easy given the prospects and accompanying anxiety—I found what proved to be the perfect place for me. Or maybe the perfect place, by the grace of God, found me. I found a place where I could grow more deeply into my ministry as a priest. I found a place that I love filled with people that I love. I found a place that loves and nurtures me in ways I had not even thought possible. I found a place that was a true blessing, not just professionally, but also personally. And I firmly believe it is all because of my willingness to be faithful to God and trust that he would provide. That he would nurture. That he would bless.

To tie this into stewardship—which I kinda have to do since today is the last day of our annual stewardship campaign—we can look to the example of our two widows of how to approach our own stewardship. Now to be sure, the story of the Widow's Mite is often cited as the ultimate example of stewardship. The woman making a sacrificial offering which epitomizes what should be our own attitude about giving to the church. Yeah, that's not gonna happen. None of us are going to give absolutely everything we have to the church. Truth be told, to hold the widow up as an example of stewardship really misses the point of Jesus' intent in calling notice to her and her offering to the temple. This text is really meant as a critique of the temple authorities and their lack of concern—even their abuses—of social justice. In calling attention to the widow giving all she had to the temple, Jesus is presenting concrete evidence to back up his claims about the temple authorities. The widow is an affront to the temple leaders, who “devour widow's houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers” (Mk 12.40a). Who take advantage of the marginalized and cover their tracks, or at least attempt to assuage any sense of guilt they might remotely have, by acting all pious and holier-than-thou.

Nonetheless, I think the broader message of the faith of the two widows, and particularly the faith of the Widow of Jerusalem, does have something to say about what true stewardship

looks like. It's not just about giving. It's about the motivation behind the giving. That every offering is an act of faith. Giving is a means of putting our faith into action, of saying that we believe in God, that we believe in Christ, that we believe in this place as the Body of Christ. That we believe this so much that we are willing to give of our resources to help make God's vision of the kingdom a reality here and now. That our giving is an outward sign of the trust that we have in the church to faithfully and responsibly use what we give to fulfill the mission and ministry of this parish, both within our walls and out in the world. And our giving is an outward sign of our trust in a good and gracious God to continue providing for our needs.

As we wrap up our annual stewardship campaign, and as we continue to move forward in our life and ministry together, I invite you to take that radical step demonstrated by the Widow of Zarephath and the Widow of Jerusalem. To boldly profess your faith in our all-loving, all-gracious, all-merciful God, trusting that he will continue to bless us individually and as a community. And that he will do so beyond our wildest imaginings.