

All Good Gifts

Peter JB Carman

Emmanuel Friedens Church, Schenectady NY

November 15, 2015

I Kings 17:8-16 *and* Mark 12:38-44

I.

We hear today two stories of women willing to risk giving their all for the sake of their faith in a good God. The most familiar is the story of the “Widow’s Mite”. Jesus, seeing a poor widow put two copper coins into the temple treasury in Jerusalem, says, “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.”

For generations this story has been used to model sacrificial giving. But did Jesus even think that it was a good idea for this poor woman to give to the Temple Treasury? In the verses just before and just following the ones we read, he rails against the religious and political establishment of his day, as the mighty stones of the temple exemplified it.

Some might find Jesus’ condemnation of the temple disturbing—after all it was the center of Israel’s religious life. But he is not the first to do so, by far! Jesus has taken up the prophetic mantle of Jeremiah, who long before him condemned the abuses of religious power to take advantage of the poor, and the dispossessed (See esp. Jeremiah 7:1-11). And yet Jesus does not end by condemning-- he also points to a new day when the world will finally see how valuable the gifts are, of those who have up till now been discounted, or been invisible—like the poor widow in today’s story. So Jesus holds up her example to put the supposedly mighty gifts of the powerful and the extremely wealthy to shame. What makes the widow’s gift a radical one is not how small it is but how huge. She is willing to give up not only everything she owns but her only means of putting bread on the table as well.

So often, when we hear the story of the widow’s little gift, we might think of her as the model for good giving. But when we look at her from Jesus’ angle, she goes beyond good giving to a worthy cause. She represents extravagant giving, open and unquestioning giving, in the midst of a corrupt and abusive world. Her giving puts the powerful to shame and causes the foundations of the religious establishment to shake—

because God sees it, and God can see, in the light her giving sheds, exactly what is going on around her.

So the giving of the widow is not just important as an act of giving. It is also important because it is an act of enormous trust in God, an act of risk and sacrifice. And as it takes place beneath the very noses of the collectors, and the wealthy onlookers, they never even notice that something remarkable is taking place. And yet Jesus tells us this tiny act has power: the power to transform the very community in which it takes place—by its huge generosity and faithfulness.

II.

How does one tiny gift turn the world upside down? I remember being moved as a young man, in reading of the actions of people in India, in the early part of the 20th century, when they were resisting the monopoly practices of their British colonial overlords. Certain key items in everyday life could only be purchased from the British Empire. And one of these commodities was salt. It was illegal to obtain salt by any means aside from buying the salt from the British. Now salt is a powerful gift from God. Without salt, there is no life. But salt is where? Everywhere. In an act of pure brilliance, Mohandas Gandhi and his fellow organizers challenged the Indian people to go down to the sea, and extract salt by evaporating the salt water of the ocean. The response was huge. Some of the salt made that way was sold openly in defiance of the law, as a further act of disobedience. And the English simply could not control the actions, the tiny but profound actions of so many little people. You could jail a few people for selling salt. But how could you keep the people from going down to the sea? The empire was put to shame, by the trust and sacrificial action of all those supposedly powerless people, going down to the sea to get salt. What a huge risk, what a huge gift, from so many tiny people.

III.

So often when it comes to the support of a congregation, and its ministry, we put the emphasis on meeting the needs of the institution, or the budget, or the dreams and hopes we carry for the future. And yet as we look back on the two gifts that scripture describes today, we become just a little uncomfortable. Because in each case a woman with little or nothing she can actually afford to give puts us to shame, by giving it her all. I love the story of the widow of Zarephath, not because it is extraordinary, but because it happens all the time! It reminds me of the hospitality I have received from so many people—once in a refugee camp in Asia, or many times in a struggling neighborhood in Rochester, or last year in a squatters' community in Brazil, and last fall in a home in

Schenectady, where people have in each case welcomed me into their home, as though I were a long lost family member, offering the hospitality they can ill afford to share, with one who needs it least.

I was with a group of North Americans visiting for a meal with some very poor farmers in Northeast Brazil two years ago. They fed us one of their chickens, and vegetables and fruit from their own garden, delicious food, simple, but plentiful. After the meal we were embarrassed, for they who had so little had given so much to us—who had plenty. One of our group’s members asked if we could make some financial contribution to the family, in a gesture of thanks. He asked a Brazilian pastor to make the request, discreetly. The pastor wasn’t happy about it, but said, “If you insist I will ask.”

The woman who received us with her children looked at the Brazilian pastor who spoke of this as though he and we were all insane. “Tell them they are our guests,” she said. “We are honored to receive you all at our table. It is the least we can do. Please do not offer us money.”

IV.

In my childhood, before we went to bed at night, my parents let us sing. One of our favorite songs was the chorus of a Thanksgiving Hymn, entitled “We Plow the Fields and Scatter”. The chorus went like this, “All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above. Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all God’s love.”

We come in a few moments to a time when we dedicate our intentions for giving in the coming year. I stand before you as one who has been humbled again and again by the extreme generosity of people of all shapes and sizes. And as I have reflected prayerfully on what I want to say to you as your pastor on an occasion like this, it finally came to me that it is quite simple. THANK YOU. I know that you give of yourself, and give what you can, all the time. Thank you.

I know that some of you stretch and scrimp to give regularly. Thank you.

I know that some of you have continued to support this Church or another even when you have struggled with your faith personally. Thank you.

I know that there are days when you have offered hospitality to strangers when you didn’t feel like it. Thank you.

I know there are some of you who have moved long distances or given up jobs or homes for the sake of your faith, difficult gifts to share about openly, invisible sometimes to all but God. Thank you.

I know, we all know, that the institutions and efforts you support, be they this church or a charity in this local community— these don't always live up to your expectations, and often, often, they don't live out God's justice and peace fully, though they/we struggle mightily. But that isn't why we give, not down deep. And you give anyway. Generously and from the heart, giving to God even when God's people don't quite measure up. So on behalf of not only the Church, but on behalf of the God you give to through the church, Thank you!

The wonderful thing about Christianity's God is that we are not measured by our wealth as bureaucrats and banks measure it. Each of us carries within us immeasurable gifts—all good gifts—abundant gifts, that make us capable of extraordinary acts that may be invisible in the eyes of power but are capable nonetheless of electrifying, transforming, catalyzing a new world into being. Faith's journey is as much about how generously we give as how much, as much about the risks we are willing to take for the sake of God's children, God's creation, for the sake of love, as about the size of the check we are able to write.

So as we come to the table in a few moments, I will say it one more time: Thank you. To those of you who have privately expressed the wish that you could do more from your pocket books, and simply have gone as far as you can, know that you give enough, you do enough, you are enough. To those of you who are growing in an adventure and taking a chance on a new level of participation in church, personally financially or spiritually or, I hope, all three, know that God sees you, God is with you, God!

There were two women long ago. One received a strange foreign prophet in her home, fed him and housed him, when she didn't have enough for her own family. A few hundred years more recently another showed up at the temple as the rich were bringing their coffers. She put in her last two cents to attempt to pay the temple tax. And over the long arch of history and time, such these are the gifts that mattered. And to these two and to all who like them have been willing to lay it all on the line for the sake of doing your part, ever since, we can together say, THANK YOU.