

SERMON
Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 32
November 8, 2009

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

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

There was a man who came to a Lutheran Church, and asked to speak with the pastor. He walked into the office and said; “Pastor, my dog died yesterday. Her name was Bessie. She had been with me for 14 years. She loved me unconditionally, and was always faithful. I would like to have a Christian burial for her.”

The Pastor said, “I’m sorry to hear about your dog, but we Lutherans don’t do funerals for dogs. You might want to try the Baptist church down the street. Baptists will do most anything.”

The man turned sadly and said, “I’m sorry that you won’t do my dog’s funeral, but I understand. I’ll try the Baptist church. But would you tell me how much is appropriate to leave for a memorial for the church? I was thinking of giving a \$10,000 memorial in honor of Bessie. Do you think that would be sufficient?”

“Wait a minute,” the pastor said. “You didn’t tell me that your dog was Lutheran.”

Money speaks. It always gets attention. It certainly got the attention of those who were present that day long ago in the Temple. In our Gospel story today, we are told that Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. There were 12 large horn-shaped receptacles to receive offerings in the Temple.

The people would come by and toss their money in the horns. They didn't have paper money like we do today, only coins. Of course the larger the coin, the more noise it made going into the horn. Also, many coins sounded much better than a few coins. Gold and silver coins had a nicer ring than the copper coins.

People aren't dummies. They had figured out that if you really want to impress people, then you put in lots of large coins. And people were doing it that day in front of Jesus and his disciples.

But all of a sudden Jesus heard two faint little chinks. A woman who was a widow had put in two small coins that weren't worth a lot of money. In today's currency they might have been worth a few cents. In other words, it was a petty amount.

Now the traditional interpretation of this story portrays this poor widow as one who sets an example for what it means to be a sacrificial giver. And certainly, this is a valid way to look at this story. After all, giving sacrificially is critical to our faith life.

There were these two wealthy Christians from the United States that joined a party that was traveling around the world. One was a partner in a law firm, and the other was a CEO of a large manufacturing company. Their pastor asked them to take pictures of anything which they thought was unusual or interesting.

Their journey took them to Korea. While in Korea, they saw in a field a boy pulling a crude plow, while an old man held his hands on the handles. The CEO from America found it interesting, and took a picture. Commenting to the guide, he said, "That's an unusual sight. I suppose they are very poor and can't afford a horse or an ox to pull the plow."

"Yes," said the guide. "They are poor. That is the family of Chi Noui. When the church was being built in this area, they were excited to give something to help it along.

But they had no money, so they sold their only ox and gave the money to the church. This spring they are taking turns pulling the plow themselves.”

The CEO said thoughtfully, “That must have been a real sacrifice for them.” The guide said, “Well, they did not see it as a sacrifice. They just thought of how fortunate it was that they had an ox to sell.”

The CEO was real quiet after that event. When they came back to the States, he took the picture to the pastor.

As he sat down in the pastor’s study, he said, “I want to double my pledge to the church. And please give me some plow work to do. I have never known what sacrifice for the church meant. A poor Christian Korean taught me. I am ashamed to say that I have never yet given anything to my church that really cost me anything.”

This story can give all of us pause to reflect. Most of us do not REALLY sacrifice for God’s work, myself included. Most of us do not know what it means to sacrifice. You see, it is not much of a sacrifice to give away some of our excess. Sacrifice occurs when we take what little we have and give it away.

The widow that Jesus is talking about is poor. She is probably wearing dirty, tattered clothing. No doubt she sometimes can be seen sitting by the curb waiting for people passing by to give her handouts.

Her whole life depends on the charity of others. She has nothing else on which she can rely. She was not supported by her past husband’s whole life insurance policy or his 401K. She was on her own.

Perhaps she might have put just one coin in the offering and kept one for herself. But she doesn’t. She puts in both of them. In other words, she offers everything she has.

Now, I find it rather ironic that this Gospel reading comes to us during the week that we are in the final phase of our annual commitment to giving pledge drive. You would think that this would fit perfectly.

Therefore, this would be a great time for me to say; “You just heard the story of the poor widow and how she gave her money sacrificially; now go and do likewise. Amen.”

But I’m not going to say that, even though that would be a faithful thing to say. Instead, I want to propose another way to interpret what Jesus is saying in this story.

Perhaps instead of being a model or an example of how to be a sacrificial giver, this poor widow is a victim. Let me read to you again what Jesus said when he saw her give away her last two coins. This time picture Jesus with tears in his eyes.

He is horrified at the abuses that are going on with the religious leaders of the day. He is extremely saddened to see what this poor woman is doing. He is angry that this woman is expected to give all that she has in order for the scribes to live a lifestyle of luxury.

With tears of anguish, anger and despair he says; “My God, look at this poor widow. Let me tell you, she has put in more than anyone else. Out of her poverty, she has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

Now, this is a totally different way to hear the words of Jesus. The poor widow is no longer an example for us to follow, but rather a victim of the abuses of authority by the leaders of the religious community. After all, look at the verses preceding this story.

Jesus had just said; “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

You see, Jesus is actually addressing the issue of injustice. It is not JUST to require a poor widow to give all that she has to live on. Now, I would like you to follow me a bit further on this line of thought.

How many of us have ever carried this story to its inevitable conclusion in our minds? Do we really think, “Oh, what a great woman of faith she was, and everyone lived happily ever after?”

But instead, we can't help wondering the fate of this poor woman. Now she is out on the streets with NO money at all. Is this what Jesus wanted? Is this what he is commending as a good example?

Is Jesus saying, “Good job woman, now you have nothing left to live on, be on your way.” How will she live? What will become of her? Will this religious system that she gave her last coins to now support her and provide for her needs?

I do not believe that this story is primarily addressing the issue of stewardship. It is addressing the issue of oppression. Jesus came to set free the oppressed. He came not to commend a poor widow for giving her life savings, but rather to set her free from the corruption and oppression of the religious establishment.

And don't think that this doesn't apply to us today. I hear story after story about poor widows or widowers who send in large portions of their social security checks to some self proclaimed religious leader who then uses the money to live in some multi-million dollar mansion.

They say; “the reason that you are not blessed financially is because you haven't given all of your money to the Lord. You haven't sown the seed.” “If you will just give all that you have, you will find favor with God.” Sounds very similar to our Gospel story today.

You see, it's hard for us to understand the situation of this poor widow. First of all, I would guess that none of us have ever been that poor. Second of all, we have a choice as to how much money we will contribute and where our offering will go. For we are not coerced or forced to give to any ministry.

If we don't like the way our offerings are being used at Atascocita Lutheran, we'll just go to another church down the street. Then, maybe we don't agree with everything that is going on there, so we go across town to another church.

In the Houston area, we could go to a different church every Sunday for the rest of our lives and not run out of churches. Perhaps, sooner or later, we might find one that suits our tastes.

But this poor widow had no such choice. St James sums it up in his letter when he writes; "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.

For religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to CARE for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." And this is still our calling as the Church.

We cannot call ourselves the Church by forcing a poor widow to give her last penny without then providing for her. Any church or ministry that does that is not part of the body of Christ. Instead, the Church is called to imitate Jesus, to be those who defend the poor and the oppressed, not exploit them.

After all, we do believe that the Church is indeed the visible body of Christ on earth. Therefore we too, must stand against oppression. We must speak out against injustices that we see day to day.

We must reflect the love of Christ for those who are despised in our community and in our world. We must shout “no more” to those who abuse others for the sake of their own gain. And yes, this could get political. However, we must be that voice crying out for those who have no voice.

Jesus went to the cross for that poor widow. Because she was such a good steward? Perhaps. But more likely, because she needed a savior—she needed to know that she was loved.

And I would propose that it is the same for us. For we too need a savior. We too need to experience God’s unconditional love and forgiveness in the here and now. And we too need to be the ones who speak out on behalf of the widows in our world. Because if we don’t, who else will? Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting.
Amen.

CHILDREN'S SERMON

How many of you collect things? What kind of things do you collect?

When I was a kid I used to collect all kinds of things. I collected baseball cards. I collected rocks. I collected postage stamps. And I collected coins.

Some of my coins that I had were very old – over 100 years old.

Now I bet that most of you have a little bit of money at home. What kinds of things do you spend your money on?

Do you ever share your money with others by giving it away? *Maybe to Church, or Sunday School, or to a friend who needs help?*

Our Bible story today talks about a poor widow. A widow is a woman whose husband has died. This widow put two coins in the offering plate. They were her last two coins.

The other people gave more money, but they had a lot more money at home. But this widow did not have any more money, only those two coins. That means that she gave all of her money away.

One of the things this story is telling us is that we don't need to have a lot in order to share a lot.

For example, how many toys do you have in your room? Guess what, if you just had two toys, you could still share what you have.

You see, God loves us very much. God shared Jesus with us. And God wants us to share with each other no matter how much we have. Even if it means giving away some things. Do you know why? Because everything we have is not really ours.

It is God's. God just lets us use things for a while. Let us pray.....