

*The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 27 (BCP Lectionary)*

November 12th, 2006

*Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California*

*Two Widows and our Pledge
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer*

The two widows who appear in today's readings are remarkably similar. In their ancient contexts, they share a common fate. Without a husband or, it seems, other family to support them, their days are quickly approaching an end. They live at the edge.

In a time of great drought, the widow we hear about today in the Book of Kings, is left destitute. Her time, along with much of world history, was before the time of life insurance, annuities, and social security. There was no fallback for the family of a deceased husband, so widows were among the most vulnerable in this culture. And this widow – she and her son – bereft of any means of sustaining their life, are among the first to suffer the consequences of the parched earth.

When Elijah arrives on the scene, she is gathering sticks to prepare the last meal for her remaining family. She is at the edge of all things, the end of life, looking alone into the destitution and bitterness of starvation.

I wonder even more about the mysterious widow who appears in today's Gospel. Like so many Gospel characters, she enters and leaves the story without a name. Jesus, in Mark's account, has just excoriated the scribes for devouring the homes of widows, still, in the first century, marginalized and living on the edge just as they were in Elijah's time.

The cruelty of the world falls most squarely on the shoulders of this widow, yet she is not allowed off the hook of the expected temple alms. I imagine these last two copper coins – all that she had – were an outward sign of the same reality the widow in the Book of Kings faced when she tells Elijah: "I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare [a meal] for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die."

Jesus' observation indeed suggests a gut-wrenching reality about a woman who is offering the last of her treasure to God, like a dying breath with a prayer.

We are sorely tempted to raise the widow up, as we have done so often in the past, as an example of sacrificial giving. Or as some heroic witness of "true" faith. But given Jesus' hard words for the scribes; and given the contrast he offers of those who give out of their abundance and the widow's offering out of her destitution, he seems much more concerned with the injustice of the widow's sacrifice. . .and the unspoken, but clearly articulated faith she demonstrates in giving all that she has.

As I wrestled with these texts this week, I was left with very few answers and many more questions. But the most pressing seems to me how best to talk about the way we give financially towards the needs others, and, of course, to the religious community of which we are a part.

Jesus, in today's Gospel, seems to pose no easy answer to these question. Are we to be like the widow and give away everything? Or like those giving out of their abundance, while ignoring the widow's plight?

The challenge. . .and the call about what we do with our money. . .is profoundly spiritual, it seems to me. And one we are all called to wrestle with, and to do so honestly, with humility, and with a great deal of prayer.

The Stewardship Committee and I are preparing letters to go out to the congregation in the next few weeks. We have a challenge ahead to keep the jar full of meal and the jug of oil from failing. We at Church of Our Saviour have been running on a deficit for a few years, and we've gotten into a cash crunch the past several months. We are coming to a crossroads where we are needing to grow not only to sustain what we have been given, but to reach out more effectively in the communities we serve. . .to bear greater witness to a world in need.

But to begin, please let me thank all of you who have given, and given generously to Church of Our Saviour. . .particularly in recent years, when there have been difficult and painful times with comings and goings, uncertainty about leadership in this community, and hard words.

Thank you for my family. We have food on our plates, healthcare, a roof over our heads, paid bills, and a car to drive because you provide a position where I may be a priest and pastor. And I say this with no bitterness – we may not be in the “big bucks” (no one enters ordained ministry for big bucks!) – but we have sufficient to give to others, including Church of Our Saviour, out of what we have.

Thank you for our staff. For Este, who just joined us, whose tremendous experience and gifts are already starting to grow our youth and children's ministries and our lay leadership in those areas. For Lynn, who comes in and works long hours making sure the bulletins get printed, the phone and e-mail are answered, the leadership is coordinated (which may include, on occasion, helping the Rector find where he left his jacket as well as what landmines to avoid!). . .and so your priests can do the work of priesthood without being overwhelmed by the minutia of the day-to-day business of running a parish. For Dan who wows us with great music, directs and grows our choir with deep love, and whose wise counsel is a great gift to our staff and entire parish.

Thank you to all of you who volunteer hours. . .some of you, long hours. . .to keep the roof fixed, the programs running, the history alive, the altar tidy, the music lively, the Godly Play and Middle Saints rooms vibrant for our children, time available for our youth, the Vestry leading, the social events happening, our eye on the needs of the greater world. . .and the list goes on and on. Thank you!

The lights are on because of your generosity. The boiler is in place because you have given (and soon the heat will be on again!) and the roof is being fixed because of your thoughtfulness. We

keep holy space because of your generosity. Holy because it offers a place for us to gather together and pray and break bread. Holy because it is a place where we mine for hope and encounter God so we may be aware of the divine presence in the rest of our often busy and overwhelming lives.

In the next couple of weeks, you will be asked, if you have a financial commitment here, to prayerfully consider raising your pledge to help meet our current financial challenges. And if you haven't yet made a financial commitment to this faith community, you will be asked to begin one. You will be invited to articulate your faith, not only with words, but with the gifts out of your daily life.

You see, our money is sacramental. It represents a value of our work and lives, and whenever we spend, save, or give it, we are saying something about the sacred priorities of our souls. When we give to the work and life of the Church and to those in need, we are saying something about the priority God has in our lives. We are investing the substance of who we are in the work of the community of God's people. There is little that could be more spiritual, or more sacramental.

We are called into the paths of Elijah, who is summoned by God to aid others with every gift he has. For him, it is the gift of prophecy. For many of us, it is the hours we offer in service here, and the gifts from our bank accounts and paychecks.

Jesus notes in Mark's Gospel all those who give out of their abundance in sustaining the life of their faith community. There are few of us who give, like the widow in today's Gospel, everything that we have. Those who have done this know best the peace and freedom of leaving everything in God's hands. The rest of us are invited, even expected, by Christ, to nourish a spiritual discipleship of giving generously.

I ask you to pray about this in the coming weeks, as we share with you more about the vision we hold and hope for here at Church of Our Saviour. I ask you to wonder about the price of a few trips to Starbucks or Peets or a dinner out once-a-month, and what it might mean to offer the cost of that instead to a community dedicated to the Gospel. . .a community that brings you challenges in faith but also memorable joy and healing to many.

And I ask you to search with me in your hearts for that abundant life where we are not beholden to our treasure, but to a God who promises everything in abundance. . .if we will only loosen our grip a little, and let go for the God of Elijah, the God of Jesus, and the God of the widow with no name.

Amen.