

Sermon for the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 27
RCL Lectionary, Year B
1 Kings 17:8-16 / Psalm 146 / Hebrews 9:24-28 / Mark 12:38-44

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The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Picking up Sticks and Offerings

by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

As we prepare to wrap up our 2010 stewardship pledge campaign at Church of Our Saviour, it is tempting to take a well-trod road with today's readings and talk about the widow's mite. . .for me to offer some kind of final exhortation to each of you to aspire to her generosity as she put everything she had into the Temple treasury. It's tempting, because it would avoid the more humbling and, in some ways more frightening implications of today's gospel.

Today's gospel is humbling because all Jesus' harsh words about the Scribes give me great pause. Truth be told, there's definitely a side to me that likes to walk around in long robes, who likes being greeted with respect at Mill Valley Market. I get the best seat in the house during worship. And, when I visit people at home in my service as Rector, I am often given a seat at the head of the table! I hope the prayers I offer publicly are not for the sake of appearance, and I pray even more to Almighty God that I do not devour widows' houses. Yet we all know that this parish has relied on the generosity of numerous widows over the past century to sustain our community and, yes, that includes the clergy salaries. Words to give me pause indeed!

In short, I feel a dangerous kinship with the Scribes, who were the keepers of the legal, religious, and economic apparatus of the first-century Temple in Jerusalem; and they were among Jesus' harshest critics. You see, Jesus' point about the widow's mite in today's Gospel is not so much about our financial stewardship, but about the unspeakably awful economic injustice that sat right at the heart of institutional religion of the day – in God's name, no less. The Scribes were so wound up with the rotten core of the Temple system that they scarcely noticed the hardship they were putting on the poorest of the poor and the marginalized, widows among the most vulnerable among them. And the Scribes' spiritual downfall is always knocking at our door. We constantly run the risk of behaving like them. Moreover, our claiming God does not automatically inoculate us against the pitfalls of grasping greed or the ignorance of real need that our drive to sustain an institution like a parish can sometimes engender.

In today's readings, I am most struck by the image of the widow of Zarephath picking up sticks for the final meal. Her words to Elijah, "I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die," I hear not said with self-pity or sarcasm; but with a matter-of-factness that is both ironic and profound. Picking up the sticks presents a fidelity to the final meal, of looking into the face of dissolution and death with a kind of dignity that we might aspire to when we inevitably meet the end of the road; of accepting the vulnerability of our true powerlessness in a world where we cannot ultimately put our trust in any ruler or child of earth, for no matter what we or others do – sooner or later – we return to dust from which we were made.

This is a peculiar kind of faith that both the nameless widows in our readings today possess: a faith of embracing reality, however hard it might be, with a trust and an acceptance that are unnerving to the Scribes within all of us. This trust and acceptance are unnerving, because the reality of picking up sticks for the final meal or parting with the final pennies in one's possession, as we hear about the widow at the Temple treasury, points to the radical poverty that is the truest reality of all our lives. It's a reality that cuts through all the hypocrisy and vain grasping that can consume us. Truly, we own and ultimately control nothing. The pretense of the scribes is only a fantasy in which so many of us spend a great deal of time – too much time – a fantasy of control over our own destiny and material possessions. Honestly, it is a fantasy in which

many of us are tempted to play God. And we must forever be wary that our religiosity and spiritual practices – the fancy robes and well-endowed furnishings – do not lead us down this road.

The widows point to the trust that rests at the foundation of true faith – a radical trust in God – and it is this kind of trust that God honors. For the widow in Zarephath, Elijah comes at the moment of greatest scarcity bringing God's power to sustain her and her son through the famine. For the widow outside the temple, though we hear nothing about her faith, God in Christ sees her in all of her humble authenticity a faithful contrast to an unspeakably harsh injustice: one wrapped up into a social-religious-economic juggernaut presided over by the spiritually impoverished Scribes.

The irony of this contrast would probably not have been lost on the early Christian community that first heard the story in this form from Mark's Gospel. You see the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70, and the fantasy of the Scribes was destroyed along with it. In fact, the Scribes as Jesus knew them were all but lost to history after 70 – their class, wealth, influence, and way of life, inexorably intertwined with the Temple cultus, would barely survive the resulting upheaval in Judaism – and what did survive evolved into something remarkably different in later Rabbinical Judaism. But the widows pressed on, and they even became of critical importance to the early Christian community, where they were tended and empowered, and some even offered essential hospitality to the small communities gathering in the late first century and after in Jesus' name.

The widow of Zarephath became legendary – not only because of her faith and relationship with the great prophet Elijah – but also because she was an outsider, a foreigner. Everything was against her, and yet it was she who carried God's favor. Her offering to God by hosting Elijah, even in the face of complete destitution, is turned by grace into sustainable abundance. Once again, God sees the world entirely upside-down from our point-of-view. The least among us are noticed and nourished. The nameless receive blessing. The outsiders become insiders. The first are last, and the last are first. It is yet another teaching for all of the time we spend grasping for ourselves that the truth of faith is not found in what we crave and or in what we hold, but in what we offer. That it is only empty hands and open hearts – jugs of oil and jars of meal sometimes running almost empty – that God can fill.

It's this spiritual teaching that we are likely to find the most frightening, because it contradicts everything the world tells us about the way reality works. We are taught to believe that only those who help themselves succeed, that “up” means having more, that our objective is always something greater than what we have and where we are now. But this is the trap of the Scribes – a trap where we devour the house of Creation to the point that she now groans in crisis, where we forget too easily that one in six of our sisters and brothers worldwide remain uncertain where their next meal is coming from, where we are insulated from the naked reality of our reliance, and indeed the reliance of all the world upon our God.

A seminarian classmate who came from a village in West Africa once remarked to me that we don't know how much we depend upon God until we are uncertain how we are going to get food for our family in the coming week; of facing famine with no clear solution. That is the spiritual and physical reality of the widows giving of their last, picking up sticks for a final meal and offering it to God. And it is this reality of offering, service, and reliance upon God's grace that these long robes, our parish family, and our beautiful space and our prayers and practice of coming to the table with outstretched hands are all meant to serve. Any other purpose or meaning for our common life as a Christian community is probably just dangerous fantasy.

But the good news for us is when we take these stories of widows into our hearts and recognize our own poverty – even amidst our material abundance – we are living again into our real vulnerability before our God. A vulnerability that, when we offer it to Christ and to those in most in need in the day-to-day and even moment-to-moment of our lives, God will embrace. And we may indeed discover that our jugs of oil and jars of meal are replenished each day, not so much because of our grasping and endeavors, but because of God's grace at work around and within us. A grace we can learn to trust as we pick up the sticks for each final meal offered to God and our sisters and brothers. A grace we can count on in all the chances and changes of this life this day and always. A grace that will, if we let it, get us and the most vulnerable among us through any famine, and sustain us with an abundant love prepared for all the world from before time.