

Sermon November 8, 2015 “Sacrifice and Trust” Mark 12:38-44 I Kings 17:8-16

Just about every day I try to read from the devotional book, *Jesus Calling*, written to the reader as though Jesus is speaking to him or her. Yesterday’s lesson asked me to let the Lord clear out the clutter of my life, so that the Holy Spirit can have room to take full possession of my heart. I share with you some of yesterday’s word: “Collaborate with Me in this effort by being willing to let go of anything I choose to take away... Your sense of security must not rest in your possessions or in things going your way. I am training you to depend on Me alone, to find fulfillment in My Presence...” (*Jesus Calling*, Sarah Young, p. 326) (edited by F. Eddins here)

Be willing to let go of anything the Lord chooses to take away is not easy. In fact, I find this to be somewhat frightening, especially as I see reports of refugees who have NOTHING and hear of more terrorist actions by ISIS and then talk with someone who had his identity stolen and someone else whose husband had a totally unexpected stroke. In the midst of all the things that life can throw at folks, I sometimes find myself wondering how much I really trust God.

And then comes along today’s Gospel lesson, and the lesson from 1 Kings, telling about two widows – powerless women in their day - who were able or perhaps forced to totally trust God.

In the Gospel lesson Jesus noticed the widow’s giving right after he had warned his disciples about the religious leaders who strove to look good in the sight of others and get all the recognition they could, who put heavy (valuable) coins in the plate in order to be seen, but who really exploited the poor and didn’t help those who needed help.

Preacher Fred Craddock tells a little story about a teacher in rural Tennessee in his book, *Craddock Stories*. “In a certain village the school bell rang at 8:30 a.m. to call the children to class. The boys and girls left their homes and toys reluctantly, creeping like snails into the school, not late but not a second early. The bell rang again at 3:30 p.m., releasing the children to homes and toys, to which they rushed at the very moment of the tolling of the bell. This is how it was every day, with every child except one. She came early to help the teacher prepare the room and materials for the day. She stayed late to help the teacher clean the board, dust erasers, and put away materials. And during the day she sat close to the teacher, all eyes and ears for the lessons being taught. One day when noise and inattention were worse than usual, the teacher called the class to order. Pointing to the little girl in the front now, the teacher said, ‘Why can you not be as she is? She comes early to help, she stays late to help, and all day long she is attentive and courteous.’ ‘It isn’t fair to ask us to be as she is,’ said one boy from the rear of the room. ‘Why?’ ‘Because she has an advantage,’ the boy replied. ‘I don’t understand. What is her advantage?’ asked the puzzled teacher. ‘She is an orphan,’ the boy almost whispered as he sat down.” (p. 16, *Craddock Stories*)

Perhaps we have a similar attitude about the poor widow. She *had* to trust God, because she had nothing else she could trust. In the long run, of course, the same is true for all of us, no matter how much property we own or how large our bank accounts. Some here have a hard time making ends meet, but only a few of us have ever been truly penniless. Most of the time we

have many layers between ourselves and the trustworthiness of God...

When health fails, when death ravages a family, nothing else matters; stuff/possessions become meaningless, at least for a while. Grief and loneliness visit those with a nice cushion of money as quickly as they do those who are destitute. And the question sneaks in, in some way or another, “Is God really with me? Why did God let this happen? Will God take care of me?” Can I trust God with my life?

How could that old widow at the Temple have had the courage to give everything she had as an offering? Did she know the story from the OT, where the widow of Zarephath was asked to feed the prophet Elijah? (1 Kings 17:8-16) Had she been told since a child about how God had provided for that widow and her son, even as they thought were down to their very last meal? Is that what gave today’s widow hope? Or had she simply given up, and decided to hand over everything to God in desperation??

When they (the two widows) emptied themselves and trusted in God, God was there to fill them up. Sometimes we worry that God is not sufficient for our needs. We’re like Charles Spurgeon, the great preacher and evangelist from the nineteenth century. Spurgeon rode home in his carriage one night after a day of hard and grueling work, weary, discouraged, and deeply depressed. Suddenly, the verse “My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Cor.12.9) popped into his head. Spurgeon compared himself to a tiny fish in the River Thames, afraid he would drink the Thames River dry. He heard God say, “Drink away, little fish. My stream is sufficient for you.” Then he saw himself as a mouse, nibbling away in Joseph’s enormous Egyptian granaries, afraid he would eat up all the grain and starve. Again Spurgeon heard God speak saying, “Cheer up, little mouse. My grain is sufficient for you.” Then he saw himself as a mountain climber, at the peak of some high mountain, out-of-breath, gasping for air, and afraid that he might use up all the oxygen. Then God said, “Breathe away, O man, forever. My atmosphere is sufficient for you.” (variously found on Internet)

How hard it is to trust that God is sufficient for our needs. So often we cling to whatever we have pulled together to make ourselves feel secure. We feel the need to watch out for and protect ourselves, to grip tightly to what we have, for fear that we might lose everything forever. It is hard to believe and trust that it is when we empty ourselves most completely that God’s providence pours in with the mightiest power.

As Maude Royden, British social worker and reformer, put it, “When you have nothing left but God, then for the first time you become aware that God is enough.” The widow had learned that. She gave, trusting God, obediently and self-sacrificially. She was neither foolhardy nor irresponsible. She was mighty, because she trusted in God’s greater might.(from Alex Gondola, Jr., St. Paul United Church of Christ, Wapakoneta, Ohio; offered through *Lectionary Homiletics*)

This week we observe Veteran’s Day, remembering the many men and women, throughout the years, who have put their own lives on the line for our country’s sake. That’s sacrifice, and all

too many ended up losing their health or their lives as a result of their service. Every day, we hear of the dangers our service personnel in the Middle East and we hear, perhaps even more upsetting, of the very difficult lives many of our veterans today are facing upon their return home after service. These folks have come to understand, better than most of us ever will, the concept of sacrifice.

Throughout human history, stories abound of persons giving of themselves for the sake of others. In her book, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, Ruth Tucker tells the story of Dr. Eleanor Chestnut, who went to China as a Presbyterian medical missionary in 1893. To build a hospital, she had to use her own money to buy bricks and mortar. The need for her services was so great that she performed surgery in the bathroom until the building was complete. On one occasion, Dr. Chestnut had to amputate a man's leg. When complications set in, she had to perform skin grafts to save his life. A few days later, another doctor noticed that Dr. Chestnut was limping, and asked why. She said simply, "Oh, it's nothing!" But then a nurse revealed that Dr. Chestnut had taken the skin for the graft from her own leg, using only local anesthetic. A few years later, Dr. Chestnut and four other doctors were killed by a mob that stormed the hospital during the Boxer Rebellion. (Told by Rev. Richard Donovan) Sacrifice and trust.

Today mainline churches struggle as fewer and fewer people take church seriously. Perhaps this is because we are usually not big on personal sacrifice and radical trust in God. We tend to be “comfortably” interested in our faith but too often not much more than that.

To fully recognize and receive the love and life offered to us in Jesus Christ, we need to make some hard choices: we have to risk letting go of our hold on whatever keeps us from realizing that we need God more than anything in life, whatever keeps us from letting our relationship with God being a high priority in our lives. In his book, *The Screwtape Letters*, the devil Screwtape advises his apprentice devil, Wormwood, that moderation is one of the best ways to keep Wormwood's “patient” from having meaningful Christian faith. “Talk to him about moderation in all things. If you can get him to the point of thinking that ‘religion is all very well up to a point,’ you can feel happy about his soul. A moderated religion is as good for us as no religion at all – and more amusing!” (C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*)

Jesus warned against the organized, self-serving, institutional religion of his day, and then watched folks as they made their offerings at the temple. When he saw the woman giving away everything she had, he pointed out the difference between her giving and that of the wealthy. Hebrews 9 tells us about Jesus' *own* offering, and how different it was from the way priests were offering sacrifices:

“For Christ didn't enter the earthly version of the Holy Place; he entered the Place Itself, and offered himself to God as the sacrifice for our sins. He doesn't do this every year as the high priests did under the old plan with blood that was not their own; if that had been the case, he would have to sacrifice himself repeatedly throughout the course of history. But instead he sacrificed himself once and for all, summing up all the other sacrifices in this sacrifice of

himself, the final solution of sin.” (Hebrews 9:24-26, *The Message* translation by Petersen).

Today’s lesson in Mark’s Gospel marks the end of Jesus’ public ministry. After this in this Gospel, Jesus taught his disciples privately until he shared the Passover Meal and then was arrested and taken to the Cross. This lesson tells us that our trust, as shown in our giving and living, is very important to God. And at the same time, it shows us that in Jesus God has given everything, as the widow did. Our challenge is to watch our own giving as we go through our lives and realize that it has a lot to do with how we are daring (or not daring) to trust God’s giving.

In closing, I share more of C.S. Lewis, this time from his book, *Surprised by Joy*, where he states that the path to joy winds through extravagant, reckless self-denial. “Give up your self, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favorite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end: submit with every fiber of your being and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will ever really be yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find him, and with him everything else thrown in.” (C.S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*)

Here we are, each of us, in life. We face challenges, we face decisions, we are trying to be faithful and to trust God.

Our next hymn is Precious Lord, Take My Hand... May this be a prayer for each of us, and may our hearts so open to the Holy Spirit of God that God can help us de-clutter our souls, so that our Lord can train us to depend on God alone, and thus find fulfillment right now and forever in God’s Holy Presence. Amen.