

Trinity Episcopal Church
Lawrence, Kansas
Sermon for November 8, 2009
Proper 27B ~ Mark 12:38-44
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The principal theme of Jesus teaching and preaching is the good news of God's kingdom breaking into the lives of people. Wherever he went, he pointed to signs of God's reign. He wanted to open eyes, minds, and hearts to perceive the new thing God was doing.

One day, Jesus took his disciples to find examples of faithful people. What better place to look than at the Jerusalem Temple, the center of worship for the Jewish people. Looking around, they saw plenty of important people who were going about offering sacrifice and praying and carrying on lofty spiritual discussions. The disciples must have been impressed by all that piety! But then Jesus did a strange thing. He warns them about people like that. And, as if dismissing the faithfulness of the most faithful of the religious leadership of his time wasn't disturbing enough, he directed their attention to a poor widow who was offering two small copper coins. "There," Jesus said, "is truly extravagant faithfulness." How can that be? What lesson was he trying to get across?

He wanted us to see that unusual faith can be found in unlikely places. It is scandalous that the woman at the temple should be singled out by Jesus as an example of charity and piety. She is such a contrast to the teachers of the law who wear their piety around wherever they went. Who would think to look at such a shriveled up old woman in order to see the manifestation of God's glory?

For that matter, who would think to look at a carpenter's son from Nazareth to behold the savior of the world? Who would expect to see the complete sacrifice of God on behalf of humanity carried out on the town garbage dump instead of upon the altar of the Temple?

Where do you look for faith? At a shopping mall or in the wilderness? In your possessions or in your poverty? Well, the truth is that God is in all those places. The key is to learn to recognize God. More often than not, it seems that those who have learned this skill usually learned it in the wilderness of their lives because it is there that they are completely emptied of the ego-inflating baubles and securities and excuses that block dependence upon God alone. Those things make us think we are self-sufficient. There is not much that I admire about the life of Janis Joplin, but in a line from a song she sang about Bobbie McGee there is a great truth that gives clarity to the point I am trying to make: "freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." Faith, is just another word for nothing left to lose.

Jesus taught his disciples to look for examples of faith and signs of the kingdom in places and in persons others overlook. He also taught them to look into the dark places of their own lives in order to recognize the bareness and need which, in the hands of God, can be fertile soil for a great faith. When we reach the point at which we have nothing left to lose, faith often has the best chance.

In the story of this widow, we see the demonstration of one of the most important expressions of spiritual leadership – the correction of misperceptions of reality. One of the most dangerous expressions to emerge from the collective folk wisdom of our age is the declaration that "perception is reality." On one level, it is true. However, the expression is most often applied not to right perception

but to misperception and leads to a failure of leadership. It is the responsibility of leaders to correct misperception, not allow it to be treated as reality. Perception is a process – the process of perceiving. To perceive is to become aware of some reality, directly through any of the senses, especially sight or hearing. To perceive is to achieve understanding of reality. When the process of perception leads to a misunderstanding of reality, for a leader to let it stand or to allow it to guide decisions is a failure in leadership. Jesus did not fail in today's text!

Jesus did not want his disciples to perceive that the teachers of the law were people of integrity. They appeared to be generous, but they were not. Exercising wise spiritual leadership, Jesus called attention to the poor widow, whose offering appeared small in contrast to the offerings of the teachers of the law. Just as the disciples may have incorrectly perceived that the teachers of the law were good examples of faith and generosity, so they may have incorrectly perceived that the poor widow was not. Jesus pointed out to them something that they may have overlooked and that detail changed everything. He pointed out that the poor widow's offering was not simply a percentage of what she had, but it was everything she had. She held back nothing. Her faith and generosity was actually the most influential of all.

Perception really is everything. But leaders must never cater to misperception. Leaders have a responsibility to correct them. And leaders have a duty to uphold right perceptions by acting on them.

The widow's mite shows us that joy and sacrifice are two sides of the same coin. I have in mind a particular widow I once knew and who inspired me. By many standards, she was relatively poor and had an enormous burden to bear. But that perception was not reality. She never referred to her life in terms of sacrifice. Her burden was her joy. What I described as a sacrifice, she described as a joy. That is the way it always is with people of remarkable faith.

If I lavish my love on you, you may call it a sacrifice if you wish, but I may not. In order for the word "sacrifice" to remain healthy, it must be confined to the comments of those who interpret the act of giving by another. On the lips of the one who is doing the giving, the word "sacrifice" smacks of self-righteousness.

My widow friend once told me of a response given to her by a man who did her a great kindness. She thanked him and he said to her, "never forget what others do for you and never remember what you do for others." Joy and sacrifice are two sides of the same coin. Each of us needs to learn which side of the coin to look at when we drop it into the offering plate.

There is another way of saying it all: The more one gives, the greater one's capacity to receive.

The poor widow, like the blind beggar, Bartimaeus, and the little child Jesus used as an example of trust, present the image of emptiness before God. In God's version of reality, to be empty is to have capacity, capacity to be filled. But that means receiving, not giving or doing, and the kingdom of God is received. Like the bread and wine of the Eucharist, we don't take it. We come with open, empty, receptive hands uplifted to be given the tangible evidence of the presence and power of God in our lives.

Having been rid of everything, having stood empty and childlike and naked and poor without claim before God, one is able to receive everything, even one's own life, as a gift. Wealth in God's realm of reality is measured in these terms. That is why Jesus exhorts us to seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness. Everything else we need will be added.

So, with empty and receptive lives we come here to God's table today. God wants to fill us up with love divine. God wants us to be fully who we are. God tells us now as in the beginning of time how much he trusts us and how he longs for us to trust him in return, to depend upon him alone. God works miracles with your life and mine when our capacity to give is first the capacity to receive.