

THE WIDOW'S MIGHT

Pentecost 24 Year B

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17; Ps. 127; Heb. 9:24-28; Mk. 12:38-44

Gladstone 07/11/2021

It was the annual Stewardship Sunday worship service, of which a lot of churches have some variation. As part of the service, an affluent middle-aged man had just stood up and told the congregation how much God had blessed him over the years. Among other things, he had related how, at one time, he had been nearly bankrupt in his first business venture—in fact, he only had one thousand dollars left in the bank, which was the exact amount of his unpaid church stewardship pledge for that year. It was toward the end of the year and so he decided that he would give it all to pay his pledge. He closed his remarks by attributing his subsequent multimillion-dollar success to this singular act of faith. When he sat down in his pew, a widow leaned over and whispered to him, “I dare you to do it again!”

In our gospel reading for today, we find Jesus where he often was when in Jerusalem—teaching in the Temple. Remember, this is where his parents found him when they thought they had lost him at the age of twelve. It was a place very close to his heart. It was common for rabbis to sit in the Temple precincts, teaching their disciples—answering their questions and imparting wisdom.

On this occasion Jesus has been answering some tricky questions put to him by the Pharisees and the Saducees. Having answered them to the amazement of the gathered people, he then moves on to discuss the finer points of humility—telling them to beware of the Pharisees who liked to parade around in their long robes while enjoying the respect of the common folk—who liked the places of honour and drained the finances of widows for their own benefit. Not really a discussion to court their admiration.

Finding a spot opposite the treasury—the place where people would come to place their Temple offerings—Jesus sat down to continue his teaching. Here he notices something that illustrates the point he has been trying to make. While watching the people coming and going, placing their offerings in the plate, as it were, he sees here an opportunity for an illustration. Along with the many rich people who came and made their sizeable donations—making an obvious demonstration of their piety, a widow came and placed her two coins in the plate.

Now, here was a widow who did what the man in my opening story professed to do—a woman who gave everything she had—not because of a dare, but as a result of her selfless love for God. No doubt it was all she had. Both Mark’s and Luke’s account of the gospel include the information that she was a “poor” widow. Not all widows were poor—some had children or other family members to look after them. The implication of her example, that Jesus points out here, is that by giving all that she had, she out gave all the others to the Jerusalem treasury—out gave even those who gave, in monetary terms, a whole lot more.

You see, the value of a gift to God is not determined by its amount but by the motive in which it is given—by the spirit of faith, which motivates the heart. Others who came to make their offerings at the temple gave out of their “surplus”—out of what they had left over when all their other expenses had been met—when all of their other financial commitments had been satisfied—but this woman gave from a different kind of perspective—with an understanding and a vision of God’s faithfulness. It was just two mites—a couple of cents, a tiny amount by any standard—but we get the impression that she would have been willing to give it all, even if it had been millions.

I constantly find it amazing how Jesus often used the common everyday things around him to illustrate the eternal truths of the kingdom of God—and here we have what appears on the surface to be a casual observation of the regular procedure of people giving their offerings at the temple. But with this chance encounter, Jesus illustrates for his disciples and as a consequence, for us, the example of sacrifice that ought to embody the Christian life.

At certain times in the period of the Temple, it was customary that when someone placed his or her offering in the collection box, the person overseeing the collection of the offerings would call out and publicly announce the value of the offering. Imagine if we tried to do that here. How embarrassing it would be, not only for those who only give a little but also for those who give a lot—and that’s certainly not a comment on a person’s ability to pay. I suppose it was a way to encourage a little competition in order to raise the average weekly revenue of the Temple. You know, if you heard that the Joneses who sit across the aisle from you gave \$200, you made sure that you gave \$300.

We're not told whether this practice was being exercised at the time of this account in Mark, but you could well imagine the smugness of those rich people who gave a lot when the size of their offering was announced—\$200, \$300, \$500. Imagine the 'oos' and 'aars' one might have heard as they announced the high values of these offerings. Imagine also the quiet whispers and snickering that might have gone on as the widow's offering of 2 cents was announced to the gathered worshippers.

But as we have seen throughout Jesus' ministry, his "take" on the situation is often very different than that of others. Jesus has this uncanny ability to show up the flaws in our thinking—turning our thinking on its head showing its paucity and narrow-mindedness. True giving, you see, comes not from the wallet or purse but from the heart. What you give from the wallet or purse ought to be a reflection of the generosity of the heart not the generosity that comes from what is left over.

God doesn't want or need your leftovers, God wants your heart, soul, mind and strength—all of you and all that you have. And that kind of generosity ought not to be limited to your financial giving but extend to the sacrificial giving of our whole lives. That doesn't mean that you have to sell everything and give it to the church (Feel free to do that if you feel God has called you do so). What it does mean, however, is that everything you are and everything you have is—or at least ought to be—an offering to God.

The widow was able to give all that she had, even though it was only a miniscule amount, because she understood the generous nature of God. She was able to give it all because of her faith that God would provide for all her needs. She could have given just one mite and bought a loaf of bread with the other, but she didn't, she gave them both, thus becoming completely dependent on God. How many of us could do the same?

But wait, there's more to this story than that which immediately meets the eye. This self-less act of sacrifice on the part of the widow is also an illustration for us of the self-giving of Jesus when he gave himself up for us on the cross. Remember, at the time of this account, Jesus is in Jerusalem—on his way to the cross. Just a short time later Jesus will be arrested, put on trial and beaten. Then he will lay down his life, extravagantly, sacrificially, generously. Jesus was on his way to lay down every cent he had for us, on the cross.

Just as the widow took the risk and gave everything to God in the temple, so also Jesus must take the risk and sacrificially give himself for the sake of all people. The widow gave so generously because of her love for God. Jesus gave his life so generously because of his love for us.

In the light of that act and the account of the widow's mite, we are shown what kind of lives we ought to live. We are called to live lives of absolute surrender and trust in God.

Giving all that we have will cost us something—everything, in fact. It will make us more dependant on others and more dependant on God—and that's not a bad thing—that's a good thing. Too often we put our trust in our surplus—like the man who wanted to build bigger barns in which to store his grain so that he had plenty for the future. But this blinds us to the true nature of giving—a giving which comes from the heart and overflows to those around us in all kinds of ways—in your finances, in the exercising of your gifts, in the use of your time and so on.

It's a generosity that becomes an act of faith—an act of faith that rests on the faithfulness of God to care for us no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in—a generosity and a faith that we offer as a response to all that God, through Jesus Christ, has done for us, through his death and resurrection.

You might say: The might of the widow's mite lay in the might of God. For he, is our might—our strength, our redeemer and our friend.

To him all the glory, honour, blessing and power. Amen.