

The 24th Sunday after Pentecost, November 8, 2015. 1 Kings 17:8-16, Mark 12: 38-44
St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

There's some humor for me in today's gospel - wearing long robes, and having the best seat in the assembly, who's then expected to say something about the widow's mite and the widow, who for Jesus represented the antithesis of those long-robed priests with the best seats in the house!

The point for Jesus where the widow was concerned is transparent: it's not how much you give, it's how much of what you have that you give. For someone with an annual income of million dollars, a tithe would be \$100,000 - which sounds like a lot until you remember that there's 900,000 left! On the other hand, for someone with an annual income of \$10,000, a tithe would be \$1,000 - try living on \$10,000 income - almost impossible, yet people do it. But then deduct \$1,000 from that - it would be the sort of amount that would push someone over the edge.

The widow has a "mite" - 1/20th of a cent. In today's money, that would be about \$2 in today's money. (<http://www.nltblog.com/index.php/2010/04/how-much-was-the-widows-mite/>) - so she dropped in two Susan B. Anthony's - all she had. You can almost hear the widow in the Old Testament passage saying "[now that I've given away all that I have I'm going to] gather...a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare [a last meal] for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die."

It's purely coincidental that this passage comes up when we're in the midst of our financial stewardship. FYI we've received a little over half our pledges, and we're roughly where we were last year, with a little over half the 2015 pledged amount pledged again for 2016. So this is my request to you - please, if you haven't made your pledge, send it in to us! It's extremely difficult to do any planning if we don't know that total on which we're supposed to do it!

Having called out the widow's great generosity, I want to suggest to that we look beyond her as an individual, because neither the Old Testament passage nor Mark's gospel would ever have intended their stories to be understood solely, or even primarily, as about an individual. Certainly we should see these stories as a series of cultural snap-shots that include a vision of each individual person as a unique and valued creation of God. But both passages are also - and primarily - focusing on community.

The widow's context in Mark has Jesus excoriates the religious authorities for - among other things - financially exploiting vulnerable widows. After the widow's mite Jesus proclaims that the temple system will not last - and here I suppose we'd have to add an unspoken "unless:" "unless you repent and return to the Lord your God and love these widows just the way you love the Lord, and yourselves."

That's certainly at the heart of Torah - more "guidance" than "law" - but "strongly recommended" if it isn't 'statute.' Torah constantly expressed concern for widows. And prophets like Isaiah and Amos recognized that when the poor and the powerless are pushed outside the context of community they're marginalized and abandoned. These actions led the prophets to

condemn the religious establishment for exploiting the vulnerable and proclaiming as a consequence of this exploitation the fall of the national religious institutions.

That's the parallel for Mark, who brackets concern for a widow with a collapse of religious integrity. Actions (or the lack) have consequences; Mark wants us to hear the widow as an example of what happens to the poor and powerless when institutions get lost, when the vision of servanthood and community is abandoned for the seductive elitism of power and control.

I suppose if we were to contextualize the Widow's Mite for today, then the question would be about how she is treated by the institution she so wants to support.

And it would be, for us, how do we treat each other, recognizing that we want to support the religious institution of which we're a part – at least I hope we all want to support the religious institution of which we're a part!!

Not only should we see her generosity as an example, we should also ask how it is that all she has in the world is \$2. This is what Brazilian Archbishop Helder Camara asked: "When I gave food to the poor, they called me a saint. When I asked why the poor were hungry, they called me a communist."

Looking at it from a different angle, Clark Gable once said, "I've been rich, and I've been poor; rich is better." No one wants to be poor, given a choice. How is it that our society – the richest in the history of the world – has created a culture where the poverty trap is real and it's very, very big?

People like the widow reach this desperate place because the Jewish and Christian vision of community has failed. Justice and righteousness for the widow and orphan, the stranger and the alien, are pretty much non-existent in 21st Century North America.

The failure of any community is ultimately destructive to its all its members – the poor and the weak and the infirm first, but eventually all of us. It's how societies fail. When we fail to value the biblical vision of community, when we fall back into rampant individualism, we're essentially signing our own death warrants – even if that particular summons might not be served for some time.

This is as much true for the Church as it is for our secular culture: if we lose our identity as a community and we surrender a biblical method that reveals the Spirit of God we actually stand in danger of losing sight of our calling as Christians.

And remember what that biblical calling is, at its heart: : to reach out to the poor, and the downtrodden and the powerless - those whom the Torah and Jesus continually say are of special concern to God. If we lose our connection with those who are at the margins and who, down the ages, have been the victims of oppression, rejection, scape-goating, exploitation violence, and - ultimately - murder by the carelessly powerful of our world, we are failing as Christians.

Our call is, as Jesus continually reminds us throughout the gospels, to stand with those at the

margins and welcome them into the center. To seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves, and to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being, as the last two baptismal promises put it.

It is, in the end, to see those things that are not of ultimate importance in our lives as means to an end, and to set them aside when they threaten to distract us. It is to value community, and faithfulness, and service, and compassion and the struggle for justice and peace for all of us – not just for some of us. It is, in the end, to seek together “to be made like (Jesus) in his eternal and glorious kingdom, where he lives and reigns with (the Father) and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.” AMEN.

