

Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Pentecost – Elise Cranston

1 Kings 17:8-16; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

Given our gospel lesson this morning, it would be all too easy to conclude with a sermon that says Jesus wants us to be like the poor widow and give more! I mean c'mon...have you seen how cute our St. Paul's kids are when they collect the offering?? Who can resist a Wayman mohawk or the Tippeys' giggly smiles? As the various youngsters totter about, ending up in your aisle, and looking, unblinkingly, into your eyes, you may rightly feel compelled to dig deeper and deeper in your pockets.

I am sure many might mistake this inclusion of the children as a ploy to get more coins, because it is all about giving, right?!? I don't believe St. Paul's includes our children to bring in more money; I also do not think that Jesus was simply celebrating Mark's widow's generosity. Instead, both our children and the widow give us a glimpse into the kingdom of God.

It is a kingdom where the economy is completely upside-down, crazy different. It is a kingdom in which what we see as burdens, God reveals as blessings. It is a kingdom where when we see scarcity, God is abundantly providing. Both our widows this morning are opening gates into the kingdom of God through these lessons. Today we are learning to accept all gifts God sends to us and to live in the abundance of God's grace.

In order to proceed it is necessary to outline a few key terms. These are primarily taken from our St. Paul's philosophy, which was taken from Sam Wells' (outrageously expensive) book, God's Companions. (There is an e-book of God's Companions, but alas, you can only preview certain pages.)

Wells asserts that Christians live in abundance, because God has given us everything we need to follow him. The caveat is Wells' definition of "need" and "follow." God does not give us everything we want, but everything we need. And God doesn't give us everything we need for a rich, successful life void of suffering, but everything we need to follow God.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, scarcity assumes that there is not enough—not enough food, resources, wisdom, love, or even God. Wells writes that the gift of the kingdom of God is the gift of God's abundance in the context of our human scarcity. This morning we are allowed a taste of the gifts of the kingdom of God, as our widows teach us about the abundance of God.

The NIB Commentary notes that the motif of the poor widow (or sometimes the poor couple) who gives everything she has to please the gods is common in folklore. Therefore, despite the fact that the majority of Mark's audience was Gentile, they would have been familiar with this motif. We hear somewhat of a fairytale from 1st Kings this morning.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sam Wells, p.5

God sends Elijah to Sidon, which is within the region where Baal, the god of fertility, is worshipped. Ironically, God has cursed Sidon with a drought so that the land has become infertile, lacking both water and food. God commands Elijah to go to this land of no food or water, and assures him that upon his arrival there will be a widow who will feed him. It is almost as though God predicts Elijah's concern of scarcity.

Upon his arrival Elijah finds the widow and asks for water. Much like the story we heard a few weeks ago, of the moose who asked for jam once he got a muffin, Elijah adds that he would like a morsel of bread. Rather boldly the widow responds that she only has a handful of meal and oil, which she was planning to prepare for herself and her son that evening, as a precursor to their imminent death.

Elijah instructs her not to be afraid, but to make Elijah a cake of meal and water, promising that her food would not run out until the day that the Lord would send rain back to Sidon. After this promise of provision the widow went forth and did as instructed, and indeed it was as Elijah had spoken.

It is interesting that God would use a widow of Sidon to provide for Elijah. The widow was a poor and foreign woman on the edge of death. This put her at the lowest level within society, merely a drag on the system. Why didn't God use someone more qualified, like a scribe, or high priest, to fill Elijah's need?

Our first widow is giving us a peek into God's upside-down kingdom—a kingdom in which those whom society deems worthless, and allows to starve, hold the keys of abundant life. This woman and her son remind us of God's preference for the widows and the least of these. And maybe even that it is in the least of these that we find God, experience God's provision, and the water of life flows abundantly. It is through this story that we can begin to watch the kingdom of God unfold, and see burdens turn into blessings.

I would like to note that I think it is just rude that Elijah never even asks this woman her name! He just walks up to her and demands all the food she has.

Both our widows are nameless characters this morning. Therefore, to prevent confusion as another widow is entering the scene, I will call the widow from 1<sup>st</sup> Kings widow #1 and the widow from Mark widow #2.

This Old Testament episode is a miracle story with legendary and folklore features, not intended to glorify Elijah but to show the abundance of God—a gift which is often revealed not via the strong and mighty, but through the most unlikely and lowest. However, this morning the widow in Mark's gospel is not in a fairytale. As far as we know widow #2 does not happen upon gold coins as she leaves the temple. Nor does someone promise to provide for her.

Widow #1 was promised provision before she gave everything she had to God, while widow #2 was not promised anything, and still she gave everything she had to God. Thus Mark's widow is showing us a glimpse into a different part of the kingdom.

Why did Mark's widow do this? Was she just better at trusting God? Should we be giving all that we have to the temple? This is certainly one interpretation of the story, but a more beautiful interpretation leads us into the abundance of God.

Wells comments that within our Markan story there is a stark yet ironic contrast between the economy of scarcity and an economy of abundance.<sup>2</sup> Widow #2 profoundly believed in the purpose of the Temple and therefore she gave to it everything she had, which only equaled one penny. This widow was living out the generosity of God. Meanwhile all the rich people walked up and gave large sums, giving out of their own abundance. Yet comparatively their contributions fall within the confines of scarcity. Jesus distinctly notes that it is the widow who reflects the abundance of God and of grace, not the rich.

As mentioned by Wells, the literary context of this passage is important to understand the undertones of irony in this story. It is at the end of Jesus' public ministry, immediately preceding Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the Temple, and the Passion narrative. Several incidents have pointed to the corruption of the Temple and the growing opposition of the religious authorities.

Additionally, Jesus has just denounced the character of the scribes. He highlights the scribes' nastiness toward widows. While the Torah instructs care for the widows, and in our Psalm this morning we read that God upholds the widow, instead the Temple system is robbing widow #2 of her livelihood. Throughout Mark there is a criticism of the Temple and its leaders; thus Mark views the religious elite as rejecting one of the most important aspects of Jewish life, caring for the poor. The widow contributed everything she had to a corrupt and doomed religious system—how ironic then that Jesus would praise her.

But Jesus sees what we cannot. It is all too easy to ignore those less than us; do you think anyone else noticed the widow? The scribes were certainly looking for attention with their long robes and even longer prayers. But Jesus names what he sees: a widow, within a corrupt system, doing what she knows to be good, and living in the abundance of God's grace. Jesus sees what we cannot, the kingdom of God.

Jesus is continuing to sketch the picture of the upside-down world of the gospel. This time "the least is the greatest" looks like a poor widow abundantly giving everything she has to a corrupt religious institution.

I don't know if this means we are supposed to give everything that we have to the church, but I kind of doubt it. But perhaps we do need to be willing to give everything, hoping and trusting that there will always be enough. As Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell all that he had, perhaps one day we will be asked a similar question. Will we go away sad or have the spirit of a poor and generous widow?

Sam Wells writes that the gift of the kingdom of God is the gift of God's abundance in the context of our human scarcity. Will our imaginations prove too small, or will we receive the abundant gifts of

---

<sup>2</sup> Wells, p .24

God embodied in Jesus? As we come to the Table we have a chance to receive a gift from God very soon. Have you noticed that there is always bread left over? There is always enough of the things that matter, the gifts of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God for continually showing us the abundance of gifts, even in what might appear to be a burden—even in a widow, or a child. Lord Jesus, help us have the eyes to see and the hearts to live in God's abundant love and grace. Amen.