

Mark 12:38-44 – Matt Bernico

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

This morning we are provided texts that are often glossed over and read as a divine commandment to give, give, and give. A sermon fueled by these texts might end up being a guilt trip to the congregation. This could have been a sermon to let everyone know that our offering cups have been a little too light as of late. Unluckily for all of you, we have been given a message that is even harder to hear than just “tithing more!” We have been presented with a theme this morning that is too large to overlook; Themes of sacrifice, giving, obedience, and caring for one another work their way through today’s texts in some very interesting ways. Hopefully, from an analysis of our texts we can understand more fully what it is exactly that we are being told here and how this scripture can better inform our faith.

In our Old Testament readings, we have a story that is a little bit subversive. God sends out his prophet Elijah to Sidon, which is the region that is in heart of where the god Baal is worshiped. Since our God is also a jealous God, he punishes the worshipers of Baal with a plague of drought, which makes the land unable to produce food. This is particularly a low blow on God’s part because Baal is the god of fertility. Due to the drought and lack of food we can all imagine Elijah’s reluctance to go to this place. God gives Elijah the commandment to go out into Sidon and just set up camp for a while. To quell Elijah’s fear of a lack of sustenance, God tells him that a widow will be there and she will feed him. When Elijah finds this Widow that God told him about, he asks her for some water and as she is turning to go fetch him the water, he also calls to her and asks her for some bread. The widow explains to Elijah that she doesn’t really have much to spare, and in fact her only plans for later tonight were to make some bread for her and her son and then roll over and die. Elijah then reveals to her that if she brings him a little cake of bread that God will not let her food run out until the drought is over. God did not break Elijah’s promise to the widow and made sure that the widow did not run out of food.

When we read this passage we have to be sure to see what is really happening here. God sends a message to this widow and all in her community that heard this story by providing food during this time of drought. Through this story, God demonstrates to everyone that he is the one who provides life instead of Baal. Also, we should make note of who God sends Elijah to, a widow and her son. God could have chosen anyone to perform this miracle to, but he chose a widow. A starving widow and her son should remind us who we are commanded to take care of. This starving widow is certainly the least of these and it is among the least of these that we find God. In addition, it’s interesting how the relationship between Elijah and the widow change. Initially, Elijah comes to the widow as a burden looking for food; but then everything gets turned around when Elijah ends up bringing the blessing of food to the widow.

Next, in our Gospel reading, we have another story of a widow, but here Jesus is doing something completely different compared to our last story. On the one hand, we are given a description of the scribes. The scribes are powerful, longwinded, and due to their long robes are apparently very stylish; but before we go any further and construct any false assumptions about these scribes, we need to really understand who they are. Historically, Scribes aren't the bad guys with black hats and long handle-bared mustaches that tie women to railroad tracks. Really, the Scribes would have been considered the most religious and pious men who had literally given up everything to serve God, but Jesus reminds us that even the most holy men are still only men. Jesus tells us that due to their status in society, they are able to abuse their power. The Scribes are prideful extortionists that devour widow's houses and they will receive the greater condemnation. Alternatively we have a widow, who like our other widow, is just plain poor. But how poor is she? She is so poor that she only has two copper coins! And due to our NRSV commentator we know that those two copper coins are the equivalent of one penny.

Try to imagine what this situation may have really looked like. We have Jesus and the disciples sitting opposite of the temple treasury and Jesus is just ranting about those dang scribes and how high and lofty they think they are, but sooner or later they are going to get it. The entire time Jesus is ranting to the disciples there are people behind him giving lots of money to the treasury, Then Jesus spots our widow, she is there giving her only two copper pieces. Unlike the rest of the people visiting the treasury that day, she gave all that she had. In this passage, the scene is very important. Across the way from Jesus there is the temple treasury. The treasury is made up of thirteen donation chests. These chests just sat out in the open so that everyone could play a fun game of "I bet I can give more than you." But despite this kind of "giving game" there are still some that operate out of the pureness of their heart. This person with pureness of heart is of course our widow, she is in fact the least in the crowd and to Jesus this makes her the greatest.

Now we have our characters and our scene all set up, the only things we are missing are their lines. The only one with a speaking role here is Jesus and due to the nature of language, everything hinges on the inflection of his speech. Jesus could be saying a number of things here. The most common interpretation of Jesus' words here is to say that Jesus is praising this woman for being faithful enough to rely on God and give all her money to the temple. While this woman was indeed being faithful and reliant on God, it doesn't make sense for Jesus to be applauding her donation to the temple. Only one chapter earlier, Mark gives us the account of Jesus flipping over the tables in the temple, he calls the temple a "den of robbers". Here, Jesus has already accused the Temple in Jerusalem as being spiritually bankrupt. Not only is the temple corrupt, but also the holy men of the temple aren't much better. This story of the widow comes directly after an accusation of the holiest men around. If anything, Jesus is lamenting the widow's act of giving. Jesus sees this widow trapped in a repressive system that may end up destroying her and her house, but yet she herself is funding it with all she has.

Even though, Jesus is lamenting the widow's donation, he isn't saying that she should not have given at all, Jesus' problem isn't the widow giving, but his problem is with the temple. It is

noteworthy to recognize that it was probably no surprise to the widow that her situation was less than desirable, but she gave nonetheless. For the widow, it's not about the temple or the scribes, it's about her and God. The widow was not playing the giving game; she was just being obedient to God.

However, this story is not without good news, because after all this wouldn't be the gospel if there was no good news. The good news is that even though the Scribes devour the houses of widows, and the widows give all they have to fund the scribes and temple, God is still there and knows all that is going on and like our Old Testament reading, God will not just stand by and let her suffer. Though, this time God is not sending Elijah, but instead someone greater than Elijah. He is sending Christ.

This is the perfect transition into our reading from Hebrews. In our reading from Hebrews, we find resolution to the stories we just read in the Gospel lesson. Here we have Christ, a high priest in the order of Melchizedek, abolishing the old order of priesthood and reinstating his superior and eternal priesthood. Unlike the old order of priests, Christ brings a perfect system that doesn't require daily sacrifices, but only requires one, and that is the sacrifices of Christ's own blood. Though we may think of this as a grotesque image, this shouldn't really come as a surprise to us, because this is how every new covenant has begun, with blood, but this blood is not the blood of goats or bulls; this is the blood of the lamb, this blood is more effective and purifying. Christ's self sacrifice is once and for all and it takes away our sins.

So, how do we read these passages together? Now that the old priesthood has passed away and Christ has become the new High priest, widows no longer have to fear the scribes. They are free from the fear of having their houses devoured; though, this time God doesn't need to send a prophet directly to the front door of the widows. Through the new covenant of Jesus Christ and his everlasting priesthood, we can trust that he will provide for us and not take advantage of us like the scribes and the temple have. With this confidence, we can break the laws of all social theories and not be concerned with our own self-preservation. Through our obedience to God, we are freed to care for others just as God cares for us. God doesn't care about how much we give, but instead God cares that we are obedient and reliant on him and we should show this with our generosity by giving to God and to others. If we are obedient to God it is safe to assume that God will keep his promise and provide for us in one-way or another. There is always the danger of turning this into some kind of premise conclusion situation where we think that if we do A, then God will do B. So to fight the urge to turn God's provision to us into a systematic transaction, let's take God's blessing and provision as they come and be happy with the mystery of how God provides.

No longer do we have to fear suffering because God is in the midst of it with us and through our texts God has shown himself to be trustworthy. If we rely on God, he will surely provide for us.