

A God of the Living

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,
Settle our hearts.
Still our minds.
And stir our imaginations,
That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

1 Kings 17:8-16

Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah, saying, "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.

So Elijah set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink." As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." But she said, "As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth." She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that was spoken by Elijah.

Mark 12:38-44

As Jesus taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.

Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

A God of the Living

It seems a bit of a shame that stewardship season is over (though it's never too late to turn in a pledge card or email Kathy in the office with your pledge), because if ever there were two Bible stories about digging deep in order to give, surely it would be the stories of these two widows.

In our gospel reading from Mark this morning, we get the story of the Widow's Mite (m-i-t-e, not m-i-g-h-t). In it, Jesus is sitting in the temple with his disciples and begins to discourse on the false piety of the religious leaders (the ones who were wearing robes like mine, awkwardly enough), about the ways in which their faith seems designed more for show than as an expression of piety; indeed, Jesus goes so far as to accuse the religious leaders of devouring widow's houses—of using the money of the poor to fund their own lifestyles. It's an accusation not only of false piety but of corruption at the highest level.

And then, as if to hammer home his point, Jesus points to a widow, who is placing her last two coins into the offering box, and tells his disciples, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." It seems, in part because we know Jesus and know what he is about, as though Jesus is lifting up the actions of this widow—offering them to the disciples, and to us, as an example of how we ought to be giving—not as those who give but still have lots left do, but as the widow does, giving all that we have. But before we dive more deeply into what exactly that might look like for us today, it always helps to take a step back and put the story into context.

The story of the widow and her two coins comes sandwiched between two critiques of the Temple—the religious institution to which the woman is giving her last two coins. The first critique we read, the second comes as Jesus and his disciples are leaving the Temple after seeing the widow. Listen to their conversation: "as Jesus came out of the Temple, one of his disciples [speaking of the Temple] said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones, what large buildings!'" [Does anyone else hear in this little Red Riding Hood's comments when the wolf is impersonating her grandmother, "what big teeth you have grandma". I digress.] "Jesus said to the disciple, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.'" In other words, this great institution that this poor widow has given her last two coins to, it is not long for this world, it is not the bulwark that everyone assumes it to be.

Placed in this context, it seems odd that Jesus would lift up this widow and her offering to an institution he believes is corrupt and will eventually fall. We know Jesus supports selfless giving, he himself will make the ultimate sacrifice and give his life just four days after this encounter, but wouldn't the widow have been better off giving her two coins to the poor rather than to the Temple? [Actually, perhaps it is good that stewardship season is over and your pledges are already in.] In point of fact, wouldn't the widow have been better off keeping her two coins for herself, one of the poorest of the poor?

After all, in the biblical text, widows are often used as shorthand for those who are most vulnerable, most at risk. This poor woman had no safety net, no backup plan, no relatives on whom to lean for support. If she had, she would have been identified by her relationship to them, rather than by her widowhood. Indeed, the Greek word that the text uses to describe what the widow contributes is *bios*, the same word from which we get the word biology. It means life. What the widow contributes to the Temple is the remainder of her life. If Jesus is to be believed, and I think that's usually something we take as a given, this woman has given all that she has to live on and the remainder of her life. Unless someone intervenes, she is likely to leave the Temple and die soon after.

And if we're asking hard questions, why would Jesus think it is better to give out of our poverty than out of our abundance? Surely it makes more sense (both for us and for whatever or whomever we're donating to) to give out of our abundance—to give what we have lots of, what we're good at—rather than what we have little of, depleting ourselves and not offering much to others as well.

Why would Jesus offer up this woman and her offering as an example?

Numerous stewardship sermons notwithstanding, I think Jesus lifts up this widow not as an example of how we should give, but rather as an example of who we should notice—of who it is who is harmed by unjust institutions. If we read the text carefully, Jesus never actually commends the widow, never instructs his disciples to do as she did. All Jesus does is draw our attention to her, to point out that even though her offering seems small, it is in fact a huge sacrifice. It's one of those moments when I suspect it would have been helpful to see Jesus' face, to hear his tone of voice. I don't think he approved of the widow's offering (though surely he approved of the widow), I think he saw it as one more example of why the Temple was failing to be God's house.

If we want a model for giving, we would do better to look to the widow from our Old Testament story. The one who, when asked to give the last of what she had, refuses; the one who knows she cannot give more than she has, the one who is upfront about the reality of her situation. If we want to know what our giving should look like, we should look not to the woman who gave away her very life, but to the one who knew her limits. This widow also ended up giving—she gave water without hesitation, and in the end, she even gave food to the prophet, but only after hearing that God would provide for her and her household, that the God who was asking this sacrifice of her was a God of the living, not of the dead, a God who creates abundance where we see only scarcity.

God doesn't ask us to give out of our poverty, God asks us to trust that God can create abundance where we see only scarcity. God does ask us to give out of faith, but for the sake of life, not at the expense of our lives. God asks us to give because God knows that it is when we give that we find room for new life, that we discover new wells of abundance we didn't know we had. But God also asks to pay attention—to notice those who are being asked to give too much, to see the people who are affected by the institutions we support, to pay attention. Thanks be to God.