

Sermon Notes for 10 November 2024 XXVth Sunday after Pentecost Proper 27B Mark 12:38-44

This is the first Sunday in our Stewardship Season. We are calling it an Invitation to Consecration. Consecration Sunday when our Bishop will receive our pledges to support the work of Jesus Christ through Saint Andrews.

And what would Stewardship season be without the widow's mite. Like Thanksgiving without turkey or Easter without lilies. The story of the widow's mite is the gold standard of Christian generosity, the story of a poor woman who gave everything to the church. She is still alive among us.

I once saw her, in a huge Cathedral church in South Sudan. I didn't notice her, until Pete Harris pointed her out. It was the offertory in the Anglican African way. It takes 15 minutes because everyone is singing and drumming as each person, and there were hundreds, in their turn make their way, mostly dancing, up to the place of offering and the crowd is cheering with song as they give what they have, laying it in a big basket. I saw pennies and piastras, pencils and pens, prayer notes, and a few greenback dollars from the visitors from America. Then I noticed an egg. A hen's egg. And Pete, who saw me seeing, quietly pointed to an elderly woman shuffling back to her pew. After the service, Pete said, that was Nayajal. She set out walking at 6 am this morning from her village, to be here on time for the great Eucharist at which the bishop was to preach. She brought the hard boiled egg as food for her journey. But she wanted to receive the sacrament of the Body of Christ first, so she kept it in

the pocket of her dress. It seems, said Pete, that when the time for offering came, she decided to present her egg.

What the rich young ruler did, Mark told us a few weeks ago, rather, what he could not do, she did do, without being asked. It was as easy as uncurling her fingers from around two copper coins and letting them fall into the temple treasury, still sticky from her hands, where they made such a small sound that only she could hear it.

From her point of view, no one saw her. But then again, she was usually unseen, typically anonymous. In life, she had a bit part, an extra in a crowd scene. One of those people who come and go without anyone noticing what they do, or what they wear, or when they leave the room.

In the temple scene Mark describes for us, those characters include rich people and scribes—among so many others. But those are they ones who stand out – people who know that other people are watching them and who seem used to it, even pleased, when heads turn at their entrance. Their clothes are nice, and they fit. They don't hang on them like the dress of the extras. They have shape, they have flair. When these clothes come into a room, they announce that Someone has arrived, someone whom the no-ones both envy and admire – the rich because they have money, and the scribes because they have status.

The scribes of Jesus' day were Jerusalem's elite, doctors of the law whose long years of study made them the official interpreters of God's ways. They were the religious professionals, the ones to whom people turned for guidance and counsel. They were the

clergy, who wore long robes, and whose names were listed in the bulletin, and whom people wanted their children to know.

However, they were not paid as ours are. There were, in fact, forbidden to receive pay for doing their jobs, so they lived on subsidies instead –a little from their students, a little from the poor box, a little from the temple treasury, a choice cut off the sacrificial lamb.

Some scribes were not content with a little, however, and found ways to hake a lot more – by using their positions to wrangle invitations to the best homes, for instance, where they accepted the best seats, the cuts of meat, the best cups of the best wine. When they wore out their welcomes, none dared say so, least of all their poorer parishioners, who were glad to spend their savings on such esteemed guests.

So while the scribes may have been without a cash capital, they were not without honor, honor that some –not all, but some of them – turned to their own advantage. When they felt their importance deflating, they could always say, “The Lord be with you.” Reminding everyone whose side they were on.

Or they could spend a little more time in the temple, planting themselves there in their long, impressive robes to be seen by those who came to make their offerings to God. The scribes were clearly the people to watch. They were the guardians of the faith, the religious aristocracy, even if they did sponge off those they were meant to serve. They were the ones to watch, only Jesus was not watching them in the temple that day. He let his attention detach from center stage and turn to what was going on in the wings, and with one woman in particular. It’s impossible to say how she caught his eye. She didn’t show up on anyone else’s radar.

She was all used up. Even a scribe could see there was no meat, no butter in her larder, certainly none left on her bones. She was out – out of food, out of money, out of what it took for a single woman to scratch her living from among people who looked right through her as if she were not there. When she lost her husband, she not only lost her place and her name, she also lost her face. She had become invisible. No one saw her anymore. No one, that is, except Jesus.

He saw her walk to the temple treasury to give up her two coins, and something about the way she did it – the length of time she stood there, maybe, or the way she cradles the coins in her hand like her last two eggs – something about the way she did it let him know that it was the end for her, that it was everything she had, so that when she surrendered them and turn to go, he know shee had nothing left that was not God's.

Her sacrifice was complete. So complete that he called over some of his disciples and said, Check this out: “this 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.”

That is why we know about her today, that anonymous woman – because she gave all the little she had, holding nothing back, which made her last penny a fortune in God's eyes. If you think tithing is heroic, try following her example. She was a percentage giver, for sure, 100% -- but while she was admired for her generosity, I have some misgivings.

Can I totally commend her, this poor woman who gave her last penny to am ethically suspect, morally bankrupt religious

institution? Was it right for her to surrender her living to those who lived better than she? What if she were someone you knew, someone of limited means who decided to send her last dollar to some TV preacher? Would that be admirable or scandalous? A good deed or a crying shame?

Nowhere in this passage does Jesus praise the widow for what she is doing. He simply calls his disciples over to notice her, and to compare what she does with what everyone else is doing. He invites them to sit down beside him and thoughtfully consider the disparity between abundance and poverty, between large sums and two copper coins, between apparent generosity and real sacrifice. He does not put anyone in the wrong. He does not dismiss the gifts of the rich. He simply points out that the major characters are minor givers, while the minor character – the widow – turns out to be the major donor that day in the temple.

And, now this is striking, this is the last of Jesus' dizzy lessons in the upside-down kingdom of God, where the last shall be first, and the great shall be the servants of all, and the most unlikely people will turn out to have been Christ himself, in disguise. 'Lord, when did we see you?' The poor widow is his last point, his closing argument. When he leaves the temple that evening with his disciples, his public ministry is over. In four days he will be dead, having uncurled his fingers from around his own offering, to give up the two copper coins of breath and heartbeat.

If you ask me, that is why he noticed the poor widow in the first place. She reminded him of someone. It was the end for her. It was the end for him, too. She gave her living to a corrupted religious institution. She withheld nothing from God. Neither did he. It takes one to know one. When he looked at her it was like looking in a mirror at a reflection so clear that he called his

disciples over to see. "Look," he said to those who meant to follow him. 'This is what I've been talking about. Look at her.'

He could not have picked a less likely role model for them. If he had taken a panoramic photo of the temple courtyards that day and handed it to the disciples with one question written underneath, "Where is Christ in this picture?" They would never have guessed the answer. There were MAJOR characters in that room, after all. The place was literally one of the great wonders of the world. It was the stage over which kings and prophets, sages, rich people and smart people, people with names and pedigrees, any one of them a better bet than the thin woman in the widow's weeds, a minor character if there ever were one. Jesus calls time, then the big reveal: "The one without a penny to her name, she's the one to watch."

I wish he had said that to her. Momentous, it was. When the tragedy of her situation took on meaning. It was a great tribute to her, in which the enormity of her gift was called out, only she never knew it. She walked into the temple with last two coins in her hand and she walked out again without them, totally unaware that she was being watched. As far as she knew, no one even saw her. . She moved in, nameless, and she left unknown. But where did she go? And what did she do, once she had given her life away?

I keep thinking I see her as I drive around town. It would sound better if I told you I had been looking for her. But that's not actually true. She's rather the ones I look around, or look through, to my next appointment, the next errand on the list.

Since I turned 70 and no longer stood to gain anything from hanging out with the important people, my two of my three best

friends have been stone, cold broke. The one, Delbert, was multiply disabled and unable to work for the last couple of years of his life. The other, Jamie, has spent most of the last five years as homeless, couch surfing, then basement living, unable to access medical care. The third was one of the richest men in town, until his addicted son and his greedy wife took his everything he had. He only had months to live, and their greed was for him a bitter grief, and his death a welcome relief. These people don't live long. Delbert is gone. Gerald is gone. Whether Jamie makes it through the winter is chancy. Maybe they know they are close to heaven. I know they know they are close of Jesus. And I know they are the most , beautiful, burnished, bright souls in the world,

You never know when you might come into association with them.

But here are a few clues. She is not a main character. While her appearances are memorable, they are all cameos; if you have no peripheral vision, you may miss her altogether. Sometimes she is a he, sometimes she is a child, sometimes she is even a scribe or, God is tricky, even a politician.... Now you see 'em, now you don't. So if you want to see her, you have to watch, really watch, because you neve know where she will turn up next.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> clue is that she is usually giving something away; her time, her heart, her living, her life. The general principle is that you cannot see how much it costs her, but it is always more than you think.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> clue is that what she is doing rarely makes sense by any recognizable standards. It is as if she gets her orders from another planet, where superior beings know things we cannot yet fatahom – such as how to let go of the little that you have in order

to receive the more you do not, or how to trust what you cannot see more than what you have in your pocket.

That is as far as I have gotten without clues, but you can probably come up with a few of your own. Here is what you do. You sit down somewhere where you can get a great look at whatever is going on, and you pay special attention to what is happening on the edge of your vision, where people are sometimes hard to see. Then you crunch your eyes just slightly and ask yourself, “Where is Christ in this picture?”