

A Widow's Wisdom



Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost || November 10, 2024 || 9:30 am St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Hanover, MA || Proper 27B || **1 Kings 17:8-16**; Psalm 146; **Hebrews 9:24-28**; **Mark 12:38-44**|| The Reverend Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Esq.

My friends, we gather this Sunday after a watershed election, where 74million people voted to return a former president to power and 70million voted to elect our sitting Vice President. While the narrative of divisiveness may be swirling through the public airwaves, through divided municipalities, towns and even families, we gather with the certainty that the expectations that God has for each of us – regardless of our political orientation – have not changed. The commandments on which hang all the rules of the law, have not been dented. The ways in which we are called on to be loved, or to love our neighbors certainly may require a new path forward based on the divisions sewed or exposed in the presidential election, but our reason for gathering, worshipping and learning from one another about God and the ministry of his son Jesus and their implications for our complicated lives are unchanged.

What feels different, and perhaps has hit your radar screens, is a level of fear and anxiety and insecurity being experienced by some of our siblings, particularly those who live on the margins. None of us knows exactly what the future holds, but we know that we are God's beloved children commanded to love and care for all. As Christians we are especially aware of our responsibilities and God's expectations for us to care for the marginalized, or our invisibly dismissed siblings. This morning we may not know exactly what that looks like but as followers of Christ, we are a people commissioned to alleviate suffering.

This morning's lessons offer us a fresh glimpse of the lives of widows in biblical times. They were among the most vulnerable and disposable of ancient populations. Without a husband, or a benevolent son who had taken them in, widows had no financial security, means or social standing. My experience is that anytime we have a widow in scripture, it is a profound teaching moment – it is an example that revolves around the marginalized, the least, the last, the destitute. When a widow is the main character in a bible story, we are invited to sit up straight and listen intently.

In this morning's Hebrew scriptures, we have the Widow of Zarephath who is picking up sticks so that she can make what she can prepare what she expects to be her very last meal she is cooking for herself and her son. All she has is a handful of flour in her jar, the dregs of a bottle of oil out of which she is going to make a cake. Her expectation is to cook this last meal, eat it with her son, and then she expects to die of starvation. We don't know if she is among the widows whose houses have been devoured or stolen, like the widows referenced in today's gospel passage from Mark, but we know she is on her last legs, the end of her food stores and she expects to die.

Instead, Elijah arrives and begins to boss her about as per God's instructions. Elijah has the widow fetch him some water and then asks her to make **him** the last cake. When she is afraid and explains her meager remaining rations and her plan for her last meal with her son, Elijah comforts her and says that God will provide. And sure enough, the widow does as Elijah says and both her jar of meal and her container of oil do not empty or fail. In this miracle story, we are told that the widow and her family eat and have plenty for many days.

Similarly, in our gospel story of the Widow's Mite, we learn that among the insults that widows endure is not just poverty and marginalization, but they have their houses stolen by pious scribes or religious folks. The story includes having rich people making a big show of depositing large sums of money in the treasury, and a widow approaches and puts in a paltry penny. The point Jesus teaches is that the widow's contribution is more valuable because it was literally all she had to live on. The rich folks in the story gave large sums, and still had large sums left, where as the widow had nothing after she gave her penny.

The widow's example for we modern folk, is her extraordinary faithfulness. She has given everything not as a final gesture before she dies, like the widow of Zarephath. The widow in Mark's gospel is placing her full faith in God, she has no doubt that God will keep his word, and will provide. Her act of complete faithfulness offers us an opportunity to untangle a few facts about faith, which seem exceedingly relevant as we consider our own faith lives in our own historic moment.

Faith, by definition is trusting in God. In the Hebrew scriptures you may remember that faith is defined as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Our own demonstrations of faith are those actions that are consistent with our understanding of God's expectations for us. The Widow in Mark's gospel gives all that she has with the conviction that God will provide. The other component of faith, which is not included in today's scripture passages is the feeling that faithful acts deliver. Faith is a feeling – if you say you have faith in God, there is comfort in that certainty.

Have you had the experience where you have taken a leap of faith, or have wandered outside your comfort zone as a faithful expression of what you think God is asking of you? I hope that you have. AND I hope that you have had the incredible feeling of being on the right path.

I certainly had that when I prayed hard about becoming your rector, and said yes to your remarkable call. When we are gathered here, or when you come to visit me or we focus on a shared conundrum, I have had that feeling. (This past week was full of goosebumps God focused or holy spirit moments)

What do you suppose the people in Mark's gospel felt as they made their contributions to the Treasury? I wonder if the rich people gave it a second thought? After all they still had plenty at home. As we understand it, their contributions to the treasury did not require sacrifices or changes in behavior. Whereas the widow would have to change almost everything – because she had nothing, but her faith and love of God. And Jesus affirms that she has made the most significant gift. I pray that she felt fantastic. I imagine that she thought of her gift often, and with pleasure – that shared sense that she was on the right path.

This month we have our stewardship campaign for St. Andrew's, and in a few minutes, we'll hear what this parish and community mean to one of our members – Deborah. I would not advise that you give EVERYTHING to St. Andrew's (and really hope that isn't heretical!) but please pray about what a significant gift might look like for you, and how your faithful donation might make you feel.

We are reminded each and every time we gather that God will provide, and this morning, I'll echo what we prayed together in Psalm 146 as a refrain that I'll repeat often this week because it includes

The LORD loves the righteous;
the LORD cares for the stranger;
he sustains the orphan and widow,
but frustrates the way of the wicked.

God does those things through us – we are the community commanded to care for the stranger, to sustain the orphans and widows and to stand in the way of the wicked. Sorting out what that looks like as a deeply rooted faith community who turns to God for our guidance in order that we can focus on others is the work we have before us. None of us can do that alone. I know that I am extraordinarily blessed to work through that and to meet God's expectations faithfully as a member of this community. God bless each of us as we approach the next political era, and let us remind one another of the laws, expectations and commandments that God has given us that are never changing – ever. Amen+

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