

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 11th, 2018
Rev. Michael S. Plank
Hudson Falls, NY

“All She Had”

Text: *Mark 12:43-44: “Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, ‘I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on.’”*

Scripture Lesson: Mark 12:38-44

Proposition: I propose to experientially show that the story of the Widow’s Offering is about the power of abundant generosity to the end that hearers will increase their pledges for the coming year.

Prayer for Illumination: God of abundance, we ask you to share your wisdom with us as we hear your Word this morning. Open our minds to what you have to say, and give us the faith to follow where you lead. We pray this in your name. Amen.

Scriptural Context: The story we’re going to read this morning comes after Jesus has entered Jerusalem and been grilled and tested time and again by people who want him to prove who he is. Listen for God’s Word.

A dear friend of mine has traveled quite a bit in the developing world, especially in Latin America. One of the first times he went, he stayed in a village that had almost none of the comforts that we are accustomed to seeing where we live. There were dirt roads and there were dirt floors. There were roofs and windows, but virtually everything was handmade or salvaged. There was no electricity, no running water. If you think about what camping is like... not car camping, where you have coolers and air mattresses, but more like lean-to camping, where you have a solid shelter, but that’s about it, that’s what life in the village was like.

That first night though, when my friend sat down for dinner, he and his companions were served an incredible feast. The amount of food, the variety, the smells and flavors and presentation, in no way matched the austerity of everything else you saw in the village. It seemed like maybe they *did* have money and resources, they just used it on rich food instead of decorations and creature comforts. But then while the food was being passed, he overheard a conversation outside the window behind him. He spoke enough Spanish to pick up what was going on.

There were 2 boys peeking over the windowsill at these foreigners who had come to stay with them. As one steaming plate passed by the window, the younger boy - maybe about 5 - said to the older boy - who was maybe about 8 - "Is that goat?" The older boy said that it was. The younger boy's jaw dropped and he said, "We don't even get goat at Christmas!"

My friend's first impression of the village was right. They were lower on resources than most of us have ever been (though some of us have been there too). They had next to nothing. He later learned that malnutrition and disease were serious problems. And yet they served this incredibly rich feast; not because they had so much to spare - they didn't - but because they were radically, unimaginably generous.

And I thought of his experience when I read that passage from Mark for this morning. Because here you have a widow demonstrating radical

generosity that certainly seems beyond her means. Remember that at this time, a woman's value was almost completely tied to a man: her husband, or her father, or her brother. A woman with no man – a widow – had no value. A woman with no value had no resources. And so when Scripture talks about the widows, they're not just talking about people who need a little extra because they're bereaved, they're talking about the bottom of the totem pole.

This poor widow came up, while Jesus was sitting and watching the treasury, and she took out two very small copper coins, which, when weighed out, *almost* amounted to enough to buy a loaf of bread. She dropped them in and then she went away. It was a completely and totally selfless act.

And if you look at the short-term, it was probably foolish. It almost certainly meant going hungry. And the short-term is how we're wired to look at things. The short-term is where we make sure we have enough food for today, where we make sure there are no wolves behind us, where we make sure no enemies are lurking outside the door. The short-term keeps us alive. And in the short-term, if you are at the bottom of the totem pole, you do not give away all of your money.

In the short-term, you do what everybody else did at the Temple treasury that day while Jesus sat and watched: you pay your bills, buy your food, make sure your house is ok, go out to dinner, buy your gifts, get your

investments and savings in line, and then look to see what's left over and you say to yourself, "Ah! That's even more than I need!" And you give that away. Or, you might say "It's a tight month, I can't give this month."

That's a pattern that is strongly reinforced by culture. It is widely regarded as irresponsible not to budget, not to invest, not to save, not to do everything you can with your money to be sure that you have a better life than your parents did and that your children have a better life than you did. I'm not saying we all do that, but I do think that that is what we're encouraged to do. And it is wise advice. That strategy helps ensure our survival. But it's a different strategy than what Jesus talks about. Because it's a short-term strategy.

What Jesus talks about and preaches about and demonstrates again and again is the counter-intuitive nature of the long-term strategy. It is the massive benefits gained from sacrifice. It is the widow having the faith that her contribution to building God's kingdom in the world is better for everyone, herself included, than a loaf of bread would be today. It's long-term strategy that extends beyond a year or so and into the decades and centuries to come.

I listened to a podcast about the difference between short-term and long-term thinking like this. It gave an example of a mother in Europe during World War II who hid Jews in a secret room in her attic. She was suspected and arrested and killed, and her daughter was taken in and

raised by relatives. But two Jewish families – 9 people – survived the Holocaust because of her sacrifice. The short-term choice would have been to live for her daughter. The long-term choice was to save the parents and children of two families. We understand the short-term choice and in many ways, we are wired for it.

But we are also wired for acts of extreme selflessness. There are many stories of women sheltering and hiding refugees in their homes. There are many stories of men jumping in front of trains to save children that have fallen on the tracks, children who are total strangers. Six months ago in France a man scaled a building to save a dangling toddler whom he did not know. Today is Veteran's Day, originally known as Armistice Day, the end of World War I, in which 9.7 million soldiers gave their lives because they believed that doing so would make the world a better place for the future. Now that's an altruistic reading of those deaths, to be sure, and was probably not universally true for every one of those 9.7 million who died. But it was for many then, and it has been true for many veterans since then, that they are willing to risk everything for something in the long-term that is greater.

And although we understand and choose short-term survival, the act of selflessness, the act of long-term generosity is the thing that we applaud. It is the thing that makes us call people saints or heroes. Because it is the thing that models for us our higher selves. It is the proof that demonstrates to us that we fallible, broken, short-sighted humans, are capable of

greatness. And when Jesus lauds that poor widow and her two copper coins that she drops in the treasury today which means she'll have to wait to eat until tomorrow, he is pointing to an example of what it means to live a higher calling.

Stories like this inspire us to be better: to be more generous, to be more faithful, to believe in a cause greater than ourselves. The story of the widow and her two coins isn't a story about how every little bit helps, it's a story about the power of radical generosity, about how long-term sacrifice makes the world a better to live for all human beings, about how faith in a cause like that builds God's Kingdom.

The woman gave all she had - two copper coins - and that gift, because of the spirit in which it was given, was worth more, and did more to build God's kingdom than the rest of the gifts combined. And God's work in the world leapt forward that day because of those two small copper coins. How much farther could it be propelled if we who are not widows, who are not oppressed, who are not on the bottom of the totem pole, if we gave all that we had? If we gave, not from what was left over, but if we were radically generous?

What work could we participate in doing? What miracle could we help facilitate? What could we help build? What great work will God do that we through our generosity might have the privilege to touch? What

stone of God's Kingdom could we handle and set in its place? God knows.
But there's a seat at that table with our name on it if we want one. **Amen.**