

Twenty-Fifth Weekend After Pentecost (B/RCL): "A Matter of the Heart, Not the Pocketbook"  
1 Kings 17:8-16; Mark 12:38-44  
November 10-11, 2018  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

How big does a financial transaction have to be to get on someone's radar? How much stock in a company has to be bought or sold in a given day to impact the value of a share? How much has to be charged on a credit card for the company to alert you to possible fraud? What's the balance in your checking account that mobilizes you to transfer money in or to suspend spending till the next paycheck arrives? How many millions have to change hands to merit mention on the front page of the Wall Street Journal or on cable weekend business news?

"[O]ne of the world's mightiest financial transactions"<sup>1</sup> is a surprising description of this weekend's Gospel about a widow placing a pittance in the Temple treasury. The Greek word translated "small copper coin" literally means "thin one." It was the Greek coin of least value, like our penny. The amount the widow dropped into one of the 13 trumpet-shaped offering receptacles in the Court of Women in the Jerusalem Temple equaled 1/64<sup>th</sup> of a laborer's daily wage. Her name (whatever it was – like many VIP's in Scripture and in life, she remains anonymous) was never going to be engraved on a plaque or touted in a printed program or on a website noting significant donors. Any observer could see that **releasing** the coins into the treasury took a split second. But no one on the outside looking in could know how long it took her to **decide** how much to put in. That was a matter of the **heart**, not the **pocketbook**, a matter between her and God, not her and her accountant. From a purely **human** perspective her gift was sweet but negligible. From a **divine** perspective her gift was greater than all the others, because she held nothing back.

I'm assuming this widow gave **freely**, and not because someone had shaken her down. I'm assuming she gave **joyfully**, too, maybe with a combo of holy humility, realizing her gift wasn't going to swell the coffers, and also holy pride, because "she did what she could do." She gave her all. She held nothing back. So, in a way, there's a world of difference between this widow and that of the widow of Zarephath whom we meet in the lesson from 1 Kings. They're both widows, which means both were vulnerable, without a husband to protect or provide for them, but:

- One's a Jew and one's a Gentile.
- One lived during Jesus' time and the other lived a good 800 years earlier.
- One gave all she had from a free and generous heart, and the other was pressured by Elijah into using her last provisions to feed him.

Elijah was like a Ninja sneak who initially asked this poor lady for a cup of water, then upped the ante to a morsel of bread, then to a little cake. The widow of Zarephath was ok with fetching the water, but balked at feeding the prophet, **understandably**, since she believed one meal separated her and her son from starvation. She was collecting wood to make one last fire for one last meal, so great was the drought and subsequent famine that had stricken her land. Elijah says, "Well, you do that, but **first** bake a little something for me." He adds a promise from "the LORD the God of Israel," whom this woman doesn't worship and may never have heard of:

*"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." (1 Kings 17:14)*

I'll let you weigh whether Elijah's promise was persuasive or whether the widow was too tired and worried to fight him, but "*She went and did as Elijah said...*" And lo and behold, like 5 loaves and 2 fish feeding the multitude,

*...she as well as [Elijah] 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 he spoke by Elijah. (1 Kings 17:15-16)*

Incredibly, Hanukkah begins 3 weeks from this weekend, inviting our Jewish brothers and sisters to remember another miracle involving oil. When the Temple was rededicated after its desecration by Greek invaders, there was only enough oil to light the Temple lamp for one day – but God renewed the oil so that it lasted for eight days! Hence the eight days of Hanukkah and the eight candles on a menorah (lit by the additional “servant” candle in the middle of the menorah).

**God’s mighty acts**, graciously repeated over and over, yet new in every age: saving God’s people, giving life, rebuffing death, preserving the beloved creation, keeping faith with promises **made** long ago and **kept** daily.

But this weekend’s Scripture is a good reminder that God doesn’t necessarily send a blizzard of material blessings. When God sends enough, but not more-than-enough, it’s God’s reminder that we can and should trust **God** above everything else. If we have too deep a cushion of creature comforts, too big a savings account, too mighty a military machine, we might count on those worldly things to protect us, we might misplace our confidence in them. For instance:

- How often did the manna delivery truck arrive in the wilderness for the children of Israel, between their escape from Egypt and their entry into the Promised Land? [Daily.]
- How much manna was on that Wonder Bread truck? [Enough for the day.] Why? So the people would **depend** on their God and **learn to trust** that God would give and they would receive their **daily** bread. (Some of them didn’t trust. They stuffed some in their pockets. It was moldy by the next morning.)
- In the Book of Judges Gideon is to lead the Israelite army into battle. God requires him first to thin out the number of soldiers who will fight: *“The troops with you are too many for me to give the [enemy] into their hand. Israel would only take the credit away from me, saying, ‘My own hand has delivered me.’”* (Judges 7:2) So sometimes the Lord lets us face overwhelming odds, so that when victory comes, there’s no doubt that it’s the Lord who delivered it!

Both of these women, these widows living on the fringes on society, merited Jesus’ attention. (In St. Luke’s Gospel Jesus points out that the prophet Elijah was sent to a non-Jew, the widow of Zarephath, cf. Luke 4:25-26.) Each one of them asks us interesting questions.

- The widow of Zarephath asks us: **who** has invited, even **pressured**, us to give what we thought we didn't have, who has offered us a challenge we resisted, then accepted, and consequently received more than we ever gave? (In her life, it wasn't just food for the duration of the drought – it was her son's life returned to him and to her. See 1 Kings 17:17-24.)
- The widow in the Temple who gave “everything she had” asks us: what are we keeping back? What are we afraid to give entirely into the Lord's keeping? What is the limit of our trust that God will truly provide what we need for both body and soul? (Martin Luther once wrote: “I have possessed many things and have lost them all. But whatever I placed in the Lord's keeping I have still.”)

Final thing to think about: it's God's generosity and not anybody else's that is the true heart of these stories. This weekend's epistle to the Hebrews reminds us:

*...[Jesus Christ] has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by **the sacrifice of himself**.* (Hebrews 9:26)

Nothing we could ever give could match the gift of God in Jesus Christ.

*“In Christ God was reconciling the world to Godself.”*  
(2 Corinthians 5:19)

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>14</sup> And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth... <sup>16</sup> From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.* (John 1:1, 14, 16)

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death –  
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8)*

Our Lord “*put in everything he had...*” Even our “all” is small – but oh, so pleasing in God's sight!

Amen

<sup>1</sup>*Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1951), p. 853.*

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