

1 Kings 17:1-16

Widows

Mark 12:38-44

There are some people in the world, who, if they happen to have anything, are likely to give it away, or at least share it. Now I am not talking about someone who is generous with their friends and family, but disciplined and modest and maybe even miserly about giving outside their inner circle of relationships. There are a few among us, for whom life can't be lived unless there is something to give away.

From time-to-time, a person so constituted will find themselves in want, that is, not only do they lack something to give away, but they lack the necessities for themselves. Most of the time these givers live at more substantial standards of living so they have what they need for themselves *and* something to share. Giving makes them happy, they couldn't be happy without it. Needless to say, they don't care so much about things.

They are almost unique. For most of us, the more we have the more difficult it is to give, that is, we give like the rich people in this story about the widow; we give out of the excess that isn't really necessary anyhow, but not sacrificially. It is not much of a surprise if we lack joy. The widow of the temple treasury becomes the object lesson of our faith.

Family Treasure

One of the common features of extended family life on my mother's side, involved acts of giving. It could be funny or tense, depending on the occasion, but either way, entertaining. Sometimes when everyone was together an issue regarding money would arise. Perhaps they would get together spontaneously and the person who played the host would go out and buy food and when the guests arrived they would insist on chipping in to cover the expense.

The host, very often my mother, would say they didn't want any money but were just happy that everyone was together. The contest was on. There might be an argument. Elaborate schemes would be invented to force, or trick, the host into taking the money, and clever responses would be made to counter the schemes.

Everyone in that family was characteristically stubborn. I am sure it had to do with self-identity, self-esteem. We would have made good subjects of psycho-analysis. I always tried to stay out of it and enjoy the show.

In more recent times I became involved because as my aunts and uncles passed away I have been asked to lead the memorial services. By instinct I wanted to render my services as a gift. Mom would have wanted

it that way. My cousins had other ideas in mind and insisted that I be overpaid.

One time they sent my cousin Randy, who is quite a bit larger than I am, and he put the money in my coat pocket and hovered over me intimidatingly to let me know there would be trouble if I refused.

Another time I received cash in the mail in an envelope with no return address on it and a card that said thanks, but was not signed, and the postmark was even from an obscure town where none of them lived so I wouldn't be able to return it.

The Widows

I am not sure what this all has to do with these widows that we have read about today, except, of course, the money, money is the way we attach value to things and to each other, and the fact that sometimes those who insisted in helping out didn't always have all that much to help out with. Sometimes, it doesn't take much.

The first woman isn't given a name, but we are told that she was from a place called Zarephath. Elijah was there and he had been having trouble with the king and queen, Ahab and Jezebel. There had been a famine in Israel for three years and there wasn't much food. God had explained to Elijah that this woman had been commanded to feed him, so he went there and asked for food.

Her initial reply indicates that she was destitute enough to have tempered her generosity a little. All she had was enough flour and oil to make enough bread for a last meal for her and her son to eat, and then, she said, they would die.

The miracle is that because she gave some bread to Elijah, the flour jar and the oil jar became bottomless like Mary Poppins's carpet bag. She was never able to empty them out.

Of course, the other widow also lacks a name and whatever town in Judea from which she came is also unknown to us. She didn't have much either, but she gave it anyway. When Jesus saw her he noted that she had given more than anyone else. "They all gave out of their wealth, but she, out of her poverty, put in everything, all she had to live on."

Money is a way of placing a value on something. The higher we regard something the more we are willing to pay for it. Jesus forces us to look at it differently. For those who don't have much, to give a little means that they have placed great value.

Faith and Generosity

One of the concerns any Bible interpreter has, especially if there is the responsibility to speak, is to get it right, to make *the* right, not just *a* right

interpretation. What does all this mean, these stories about poor widow's who share their last resources even if it means they will die?

The rich, by comparison, aren't giving very much at all! Are we to entertain the possibility that all Christians, all believers in Jesus, are simply to take everything they have and put it in the offering plate, insisting that they not be refused, like my cousins? That if we did such a thing our bank accounts would become endless repositories of funds like the oil jar in Zarephath or Mary Poppins bag? Shall we try it?

Conservative estimates are that there are over 2 billion believers in the world, including several billionaires. Some of them actually have sources of income so that even if they gave everything away, the next day *new* income would arrive and they would still be rich.

Are we to be like St. Anthony, who went into a church way back in the 4th century and went to the altar bible and read these words, about the rich young man in Matthew's gospel, "Go, sell all you have, give it to the poor, and come follow me?" And he took it literally and went out and did it!

Would I be getting it right if I said that is what we should do?

For some, that might be the case, but I think we must look deeper. I do not say this because it is too demanding, not realistic, and not likely to happen

anyway. I say it because whether we like it or not we live in a world that places monetary value on everything. We can not escape the world of money so easily, no matter how much we might like to.

But we can not put monetary value on human life. The larger point is about the intrinsic value of every human being, even the ones, perhaps especially the ones, on whom less monetary value applies, the have nots of the world, like these two women.

The temptation is to make this a stewardship sermon. the truth is all sermons are stewardship sermons. We give because we believe, and not just our money, but our time and energy, our humanity, ourselves. We spend ourselves on what we *believe* in. We give of what is most precious to us to what we believe in the most.

But let us not miss that Jesus sees the precious value of every person, including ourselves, and everyone else too.

God sees who we are, what kind of person we aspire to be, and God's life has been given for us. And that means we are each one precious, every one. Let that be the source of your self-esteem. But also let it challenge you as you run across others who are not so easy to see as precious. I will let you work out the implications.

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