

Date: November 7, 2021 (Pentecost 23)

1. Texts: Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17; Ps. 127; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44.
2. Subject: discipleship.
3. Topic: gratitude as motivation for sacrifice.
4. Aim: challenge.
5. Proposition: "The widow gave because she had received."

GRATITUDE, GIVING AND SACRIFICE

Truly I tell you, this poor 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.¹

Quite rightly this widow is thought of as a heroine.

Being a widow, she had no one to provide for her and next-to-no way to earn a living wage. There were no social services back in her day. It looks like, if she did have any sons, they had taken control of any estate left by her dead husband and left her with nothing. Her dress and demeanour proved that she was poor. Still, she gave all that she had to live on for that day to the temple treasury. The widow of Jerusalem is a heroine.

I wish we knew more about her. I wish we knew her name. I wish we knew what her circumstances were. Most of all, I wish we knew why. What could motivate someone to go without food for a day for the sake of the faith? What could motivate someone to give up their living for an institution?

We can only speculate. Jesus didn't tell his disciples anything about the widow. We don't know if she suffered at the hands of her own sons. We don't know if she was actually homeless. But, given her example of faith, we might benefit from speculating. What could drive a person to sacrifice so much for the institutional faith?

Let's start with the certainty of the Jews regarding the temple of Jerusalem. They were certain that the Holy of Holies was God's residence on Earth. The

¹ Mark 12:43-44.

temple was the portal through which God himself came into contact with the Earth and with humans. The temple was not an institution. It was the home of God on Earth.

The widow was not giving to an institution. She was giving to God. That's not speculation. That's fact.

Here's the speculation. The widow gave all that she had to live on for that day. Perhaps she was a beggar, living on the street. Perhaps her son would give her only two coins a day. It could have been that she had no guarantee that she'd receive enough to live on the next day. What could possibly motivate her to give up her living?

I could come up with only one thing: gratitude. She must have received something *from* God to be willing to sacrifice so much *to* God. Gratitude turned the widow into a heroine. We can't know what she received. Certainly it wasn't wealth or food security. But I think the only thing that could motivate such sacrifice was gratitude.

We are immediately challenged by her gratitude.

We can't view the Church as the dwelling place of God. But we can't see the Church as institution either. The Church is the focal point of the Christian community and that community is the dwelling place of God's Spirit. The Church is the mountain pasture of God's flock. The Church is the arena where the whole Body of Christ rejoices with one another, finds support for living from one another and experiences the nearer presence of God himself. That's the Church.

The widow's thankful sacrifice asks us the question, "For what are we grateful?"

We're never grateful for what we have earned. That's ours by right. So, we're not grateful for our salaries. We can be grateful for the fact that there was a house to buy, but we took out the mortgage and we're paying the interest.

We've earned that house and work hard to maintain it. We're not grateful for what we have earned.

We are grateful for what we have received. We probably don't say thanks for our salaries, but we do say thanks for our gifts. For what do you want to say, "Thank you" to God?

Probably your mind goes immediately to the people in your life. We don't earn our spouses or families. We don't earn our relationships. It is actually easy to give thanks to God for those people in our lives who communicate his love to us. Perhaps despite her material circumstances, the widow of Jerusalem could give thanks for the people in her life.

It may take more effort, but we likely can give thanks to God for the person each of us has become. We don't earn our parents, siblings or teachers who have helped God to mold us into the people we are. We simply receive his presence, guidance and influence. God makes a gift of himself to us, and for that we can be grateful.

We can push that sense of gratitude even further—all the way to faith and salvation. We don't earn eternal life. We can't earn the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Every bit of hope, insight and personal fulfillment that comes from God is a gift. Eternal salvation and the faith that accompanies it are gifts. The privileges of prayer and worship are gifts. The community of the Body of Christ is a gift. For such gifts we can be grateful.

It could be that such gratitude for all that we have received can push us into sacrificial living, just as it likely did for the widow of Jerusalem.

We can all feel the pressure of her gratitude. The question is no longer, "For what are we grateful to God?". The question now reads, "Are we grateful to God?"

Everyone's answer to that question is a matter of choice. We choose to live in gratitude. We choose to recognize God's generosity to us. We decide that we

will give to God in gratitude for all that we have experienced and received. No one can answer this question for us. It must be an answer of our own making. "Are we grateful to God?"

If we can answer yes in good conscience, then the example of the widow clearly tells us what to do: we give sacrificially to God. Sure, we have to figure out what to give and how to give. But if we are thankful to God, we give sacrificially to him. Generosity *to* God is the best response to the generosity *of* God.

I can imagine this tiny, old lady, dressed in shabby and dusty clothes, dropping her two coins into the guarded box of the temple. She would have been invisible and would have gone unnoticed by nearly everyone around her. But not by Jesus. He witnessed the size of her gift and heralded her as a heroine. Her example of gratitude-fueled sacrifice challenges us to see what God is doing in our lives. Her example challenges us to generous gratitude.

May we respond to this challenge as she did.

AMEN.