

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller
The Twenty-fourth Sunday After Pentecost
8 November 2015

Scripture readings:

1 Kings 17:8-16

Psalm 146

Hebrews 9:24-28

Mark 12:38-44

Well, this is a rich gospel lesson, isn't it? I think it was written by a Methodist or a protestant or somebody who had an issue with the Church. Maybe it was written by Jesus. The first half of it is about people... Do you know how embarrassing it is to read those things standing in front of you in a long robe, getting ready to put on more long robes? *[laughter]* Sometimes it get close to the bone. And you may or may not know this, but I don't have any real issue with the liturgical life of the Church, depending on how it's used. You may know in my first parish we developed a highly evolved liturgy with incense every week and processions and bells.

The point of this is not necessarily about the liturgical behavior but the attitude of those who were exercising that behavior in terms of their worship. This is about the ordinary structures in the world, in life, in politics, in our relationships with everybody in the world which are built on a pre-Christian model of a pyramid. Those at the top are special. Those at the top are closer to God. Those at the top have more, have a larger stick, have more power, more money, more influence, and frequently a whole lot more arrogance. The ones on the bottom, whether or not it's known, are the ones who support that pyramid, give it a foundation and who are essentially taken advantage of so that those power structures can be constructed and function. It all comes to a point in Church and society, in the world, in our relationships with each other. There are some hats that are shaped that way - dunce hats. That's not the only one that's pointed.

And Jesus looks at these people - essentially his friends, his colleagues, Church people - and he says, *"You know, they like to have the best seats in church. They like to be greeted with respect at Dutch's - I mean at the marketplace. [laughter] They walk around in long robes and at the same time they're doing that, they devour widows' houses and, for the sake of appearance, say long prayers. They know all the right behaviors in church, they make the sign of the cross at the right time, they kneel when they're supposed to, they stand when they're supposed to, they sing the right anthems at the right time in tune, and they're pretty sure that when they take this much time and energy that that makes them better, closer to God and makes God happy. They're sure of it."*

Jesus says they will receive the greater condemnation because their religion glorifies themselves at the expense of others. We live in an extraordinary time where the primary leader of Christianity gets this text and lives it out. Do you ever hear anything from the mouth of this pope that doesn't express concern for the widow, the orphan, the poor, the immigrant? I never hear anything different from him. How refreshing that is to have in our time a voice from the top of the pyramid in a very pointy hat saying, *"You have to remember the foundation, you have to remember where it all comes from, and you have to be sensitive about that."* And that's an extraordinary effort in the life of the Church to invert it and to believe that those at the top have the job of serving those at the bottom, not standing on their faces to get there. To use that power, to use that authority, to use that influence, to use that money to serve those who are without. And Jesus says, *"If that's not what they're doing, their's not only will be condemnation, but it will be the greater condemnation."*

So he rides through the streets of New York in a Fiat, for goodness' sake. And even if that doesn't mean much, it's a symbol. And if there's any place where a symbol means much, it's in the Church. Even if it doesn't mean much, he still lives in the Vatican, but he's not in the papal apartments. It says something to the world.

I noticed this morning that he was upset about something, and I didn't know what it was. I didn't understand all the Italian, but the message that I got was that the Church is an evolving institution and we're going to continue to go forward. I don't care. Apparently there was a leak in the Vatican but he's not going to be deterred by these things, and the Church needs to move forward and evolve as an institution that understands the situation of the world and serves the poor and takes care of those in need, that the Church does the business that Jesus pointed to.

Then the second half of this gospel is very fascinating because it's the poor widow who put her two ha'pennies, two coins that total a penny, in the same slot where all the large donors are putting their gifts. Jesus sits there and watches this and he realizes that those who are in pointed hats and long robes who say the long prayers, who are professional religionists, who are certain and assured of God's love because of their activities, probably don't pay much attention to this poor widow who gives the last cent she has into the same slot where the others gave their huge donations and says, *"There is a difference. She, not in terms of quantity but in terms of sincerity, has given more."* Well, that distinction, it seems to me, is what this is all about. It's Jesus' instruction that how we live out our lives and use the resources that are ours for the brief moment that we are in this world will tell the world, the world who watches, Jesus who sits there across from the treasury - how we do with what we have will tell the world exactly what it is we believe about God. All of the prayers, all of the vestments, all of the liturgy, all of the religious hoopla notwithstanding. In other words, you can't fool Mother Nature. Do you remember the ad? What was that for? Butter. Even better than butter, you can't fool the Almighty. God isn't a dumbbell. All Jesus is saying is God is in love with you already. Stop it! Just stop trying to impress God with your religiosity because, quite frankly, it doesn't smell like incense in divine nostrils. It smells more like a barn floor. God is interested in a full-time, 24-hour-a-day, 7-days-a-week relationship with God's creation. That means you and me and everybody else, and that's the point of the widow in the second part of this gospel. Jesus is saying, *"There, with the little bit that she has, there God has a relationship with a human being which is detectable by how she lives her life with the little bit that she has."*

Now it's not designed that the last Sunday of a stewardship campaign should have these lessons. That's pure accident, believe me. A happy accident, but it gets even happier because I don't think this is about how you tithe - well, maybe it is - or how you give or how you share with the church because, frankly friends, I don't think giving to the church is giving to God. I think it's giving to an institution which has expenses, which performs functions that we understand we can't do ourselves. It invites us into community to do things better than we would do alone, and it helps us come to the belief that in fact the only way God can be served in this world is in service to other people. The people in the long robes with the long prayers were giving from their leftovers so that they could be seen, so that they could become more powerful, more influential, more revered, more respected, I'm going to use bad English - more closer to God on the basis of the amount that they gave with having a relationship with God that looks like, *"You are heavenly fool. You are a dunce. I will share a generous amount but from my leftovers. This will not inconvenience me at all. I will share what I have with you."* The widow, on the other hand, looks in her purse and - let's be frank - she doesn't have enough to buy the next roll of toilet paper, but she sees what is there and says, *"This is God's gift to me. This is not mine and this is shareable."*

Now I don't know what your experience has been in life, but one of my early experiences in a really poor country was in the 70s when I went to Mexico several times to study Spanish. There were lots of poor people there and no, not every Mexican has a pistol in his pocket. None that I ever met did. I fell seriously ill when I was there. I knew not to drink the water, but I did have a drink with ice in it. You have to know that in Mexico ice is delivered by being pushed down the gutter. I got Montezuma's Revenge bad. I remember lying in my bed and feeling the heat from my head reaching my arm before my head did. The young man in that place where I was living fed me, cared for me, looked after me, shared what he had with me just because I was ill and needed it. I don't know his name any more, but I will never ever forget that. I had way more than he did, but my need was greater at that point. And his understanding of what his little bit was important for really communicated to me. It's that simple. And Jesus says if you really are interested in being religious, have a

wonderful relationship with God and, by the way, God is having that relationship with you already. You don't have to bend over backwards to make God love you. God loves you already. Believe that! Just start by believing that and by believing that if God can love you, for God's sake, God can love anybody else in the world. That requires a certain amount of humility, doesn't it? Some of you remember catechisms - *"I believe that on my own I cannot believe."* Believe that even your belief is a gift from God. All that I am and have is a gift from God. Not my gift to God. Everything I have and all that I am is God's gift to me. Period.

So when I look in my purse, whether or not it's two million or two half-cents, my belief about God will inform me in terms of what I see there. And Jesus says, *"She sees more in her two pitiful pennies than the rest of you see in your great wealth. She sees there God's gift and therefore she has no compunction about sharing it. It's not hers; it's God's. God gave it to her, and because she understands God's great care for her, she is empowered to share that with others."* So frankly, friends, I think maybe we ought to exercise the business of not pledging at all. Who needs a portion of what it is that God gave you? I really do believe that an exercise which will surely last us all the rest of our lives will inform us that every last penny we spend, including the 76 cents on Chiclets, the 5 dollars on cigarettes, the 3 dollars on a gallon of gas, the mortgage payment, the oil payment...that everything we spend in our lives is God's gift to us to use in some way or another. The request is that we live our lives, not just the money we give to the church...I do think that's a mistake we need to work at. Giving to the church is not giving to God. Living well with what we have - all of it, the last two half cents - that's giving to God. How it is we live our lives with the resources we have been given in absolutely everything we do is stewardship. Because you see the other guys gave their tithe and then to hell with the rest of it or *"I'll give you a portion; the rest is mine!"* I earned it. God has nothing to do with it after I slice off his piece."

Jesus really consistently throughout his ministry invites us to believe that God is so desperately in love with us that all God wants from us is to love back in return, to be in relationship with God which is not contractual but personal, not *"I did this for you; therefore you do this for me,"* but *"I love you and you love me, and therefore our resources are ours to do whatever it is we want to do with it."* Funny, isn't it? *"Yours and mine, God. Our resources to do your will."* The poor woman got it. The other guys didn't. And so we support our congregation and our church because this organization, I hope, helps us to get it. It gives us a place to return regularly. It gives us a place to be regularly nourished and refreshed and to see in each other, absolutely every last one of us, an opportunity to look God squarely in the face and say, *"How is it God loves us? How is it shall we share this love beyond ourselves? Period"*

That's what nourishment is all about. And so even when we don't have a potluck supper, we have a crumb of bread, a sip of wine to remind us that God gives us all that we have and are, and God loves us, and these resources are ours to share with God in the only way we possibly can - by sharing them with others. Simple enough. Simple enough. We fail to believe it left and right, and we return regularly to exercise and practice our belief that we are, in fact, loved that much by God and nothing is lost when that love is shared.

The widow in the first lesson had every reason not to give Elijah anything. She didn't have enough for her and her son. And of course I smile to myself when I read this. Elijah sounds just like every other clergymen: *"You don't have much. Give it to me."* [laughter] But the point of the story is even very little, when understood as God's gift, can be shared successfully and without threat to the giver. One of the economies that fascinates me most is - I think it's called zero based economy. I have a hundred dollars in my pocket and I give Duncan \$20 and Vito \$20 and Fred \$20. I'm left with \$40.

But God's economy is more like a candle. There are five of them here. You light one and you have one candlepower. You split the flame and light another and you have two candlepower. You split the flame and you have three, four, five candlepower and nothing's lost. More light and more heat is generated when God's economy is understood. And I think, if anything, today's lessons are about God's economy which I'm convinced is not pyramidal unless, of course, it's completely inverted.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.