

Mark 12:38-44 - The Ministry of Widows

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I King 17:8-16, Psalm 146, Hebrews 9:24-28, Mark 12:38-44

I will never forget as a young teenager having the honor and privilege to have Elisabeth Elliot come to my church and tell the story of her family's journey to Ecuador to share Christ with the Waorani Tribe. She shared with us the story of how she and Jim met at Wheaton college and then moved individually to Ecuador specifically to share Christ with the Quechua Indians. It was there they fell in love and got married. Most of you probably know the story of Jim Elliot and four other missionaries that made contact from their [airplane](#) with the tribe from a loudspeaker and a basket to pass down gifts. After several months, the men decided to build a base a short distance from the Indian village, along the [River](#). There they were approached one time by a small group of Waorani and even gave an airplane ride to one of them whom they called "George". Encouraged by these friendly encounters, they began plans to visit the Waorani. Before they were able to visit they were all killed by a group of the tribes warriors. What I remember most was the unbelievable story of how over the next two years after his death by the Waorani Elisabeth continued to make contact with them, learned their language and in 1958 she moved with her 3 year old daughter to live with them for the next two years. I had never been so riveted by any sermon before in my life! She told about eating monkey limbs and the day to day adventures they had living in the rainforest. I remember tears streaming down my face as she told her story of redemption and forgiveness. Listen to what Elisabeth said about the men who killed her husband: "The Auca was trying to preserve his own way of life, his own liberty," "He believed the foreigners were a threat to that liberty, so he felt he had every right to kill them. In America, we decorate a man for defending his country." Unbelievable!

However, there was one thing that I still have not gotten over to this day...

It was so obvious to me from going to church every week that when the time for the sermon came, the pastor would climb the stairs to the pulpit where he peered down on the congregation and where we would all be able to see him without having to look around the person's head in front of us... However, when Elisabeth Elliot spoke, she was on the floor level on the other side of the room from the pulpit. Afterwards I asked my youth pastor why she chose to stand at floor level where we all had a hard time seeing her. It was then I learned that our denomination did not allow women to have a leadership role in the church, therefore she was not allowed to be in the pulpit--the place reserved for the preaching of God's word.

I remember feeling the blood race to my ears, my heart raced and I said something in response like, if Elisabeth Elliot has not earned the right to stand in the pulpit in front of our church then no one I know has!

Now my homily this morning is not about women in leadership roles within the church and the debate that is out there on this...although that might be a lot of fun! Our sermon today is on the widow--both the figurative and literal representation of what the bible calls "the least of these". God not only calls us as the body of Christ to care for them, but goes a step further and shows us how he uses those the world might consider useless to reveal himself to the rest of us.

In this morning's readings we are introduced to two more widows; the first we find in 1 Kings 17:8-16 where God tells Elijah that he has commanded a widow to feed him. I find it hilarious that it does not appear the widow got the message from God about that because instead of being totally willing to hook Elijah up, she actually puts up a little bit of a fuss, and rightly so by the way, when she tells him that, "I have only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die".

Folks, it doesn't get much more desperate than that! Literally preparing for her last meal with her son. Obviously, no one else to go to. No one to take care of her.

Now we could spend a lot of time in this passage and even go beyond our reading from 1 Kings with the widow and talk about her son dying and Elijah praying for God to raise him from the dead--which he does! But, I also want to move to our Gospel reading for the day and see how Jesus--God in flesh--once again uses the faith and obedience of a widow to show all of us what true life and love look like.

To set the stage in our passage in Mark, we are finishing up chapter 12 and winding down Jesus' encounters, debates and dialogues with the religious leaders in the temple. He is once again calling them out on their quest for power, prestige and honor at the cost of abusing those without.. In fact he directly accuses them in verse 40 of devouring widows houses conjuring up no doubt passages all throughout the OT that denounce the abuse of the helpless which the widow symbolized. Isaiah 10 is a good example of passages that might have been running through their minds as Jesus was talking. It says this:

Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless...

After Jesus calls out the religious leaders, he withdraws to a spot across from the treasury which is probably a reference to one of the thirteen boxes shaped like a trumpet in the court of women outside the temple. It is there he sits and observes people putting money into the offering box. Mark points out the rich people throwing in large amounts into the coffers and then the widow contributing her two tiny coins. I can imagine her coins must have sounded like a distant clink hitting the sides of the trumpets compared to that of the larger gifts.

David Garland in his commentary on Mark notes that, "The small amount of the widow's contribution suggests that her gift could only go into the free-will offering, which went to the building on the temple". Don't miss the tragedy here of where her gift would be designated--to the upkeep of the temple, the very place where Jesus has just turned over the money changers tables and called it a den of robbers. He calls the disciples over and says, "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 her poverty, put in everything--all she had to live on". I love Peterson's translation here that reads, "'The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they'll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford—she gave her all.'"

Here we have a glorious example of someone giving all of themselves to God, her possessions for sure, but also obviously her whole heart and soul as well. Garland again points out what might not be as obvious for us living so far removed from the context of the temple politics. He says this, “Now that she has given all she has, what will happen to her? Who in the temple hierarchy will help her” what will happen to all the money? She throws away her living for the sake of the temple. We also have here a foreshadowing of what will come of Jesus where the religious rulers will soon throw away the life of Jesus in order to hold on to their own power.

Doug sent out an email to the church recently about me being ordained as a deacon this coming Thursday. Now, if you are anything like me, before coming into the Anglican Tradition, I thought deacons were just like elected leaders in the church. I was not aware of them being ordained clergy in some denominations. The history of the deacon goes back to Acts 6 when there was a complaint that the converted widows were not being treated as well as the Jewish ones and the early church needed help in making sure the community was being cared for. The deacon’s role in the local church then and today is to remind the congregation of our call to care for the poor and the oppressed, both in our congregation and out, both believers and nonbelievers alike! Well, in our readings this morning and Year B in the lectionary, the job has been made easy and almost impossible to ignore if we are paying attention as we have been reminded time and time again over the past several months of God’s call to care for the orphan, the widow and his anger when it does not happen.

Here is the beauty though... In our passages this morning, and even in my own personal experience in the story I shared to start us off, God, as he often does, flips the paradigm of us serving and giving to those without power, and uses what the world considers weak and insignificant to teach the rest of us the true meaning of life, love and service to our God and King.

We see it with Elisabeth Elliot in her forgiveness of and service to those who she could have considered her enemies., we see it with the widow giving her final meal to Elijah trusting that God will provide, and we see it in the temple as the widow gives everything she has, again, trusting God to provide for all of her needs even when the church has failed. And finally, we see in the life of Jesus himself as Philippians tells us:

Who, being in very nature^[a] God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.

7

rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature^[b] of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

8

And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

I want to leave us this morning with a warning and a challenge.

One of the things I really love and appreciate about the Anglican tradition is the emphasis on laity within the church and the fact that all of us are a part of the royal priesthood as outlined in 1 Peter 2:9 that says that you and I are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness and into his marvelous light!

Here is the cold hard truth... every one of us in this room have been given power, prestige, and honor by way of the grace of God and the family, country and even race that we were born into. Again, each of us in our own and specific ways. And as followers of Jesus, and therefore his priests, I don't want us to walk away this morning thinking we are off the hook and that we are not like the religious leaders who love to parade around and take advantage of our position over others. I think if we are honest, we are all guilty daily of abusing creation around us by leveraging our own power and privilege for our own gain and at the detriment of others. I am not saying we are going around and overtly and consciously doing this. However, I do think some of this is so ingrained within us and our culture that we do not even know we are doing it.

Here is my challenge and prayer for myself and all of us this morning. I pray that God, in His mercy and by the power of His Holy Spirit that lives inside of us, would give us eyes to see the least among us and that He would give us the courage once He shows us, to love, serve and provide for those he is leading us to intervene on behalf of. I imagine, if we are bold enough to open ourselves up to it, He might even surprise us with the wisdom and truth that is revealed through the very ones He is calling us to serve. Isn't that just how God works?

I am going to close this morning with a prayer from The Common Book of Prayer and would love for all of us to join in this prayer of self-dedication that is found in the bulletin:

Please join me:

A Prayer of Self-Dedication

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you,
so guide our minds,
so fill our imaginations,
so control our wills,
that we may be wholly yours,
utterly dedicated unto you;
and then use us, we pray you, as you will,
and always to your glory and the welfare of your people;
through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.