

GIVING ALL

Sermon for Pentecost 23B, Proper 27: Mk 12:38-44

LPC, 11/8/09

I was very involved in dramatics in high school. One of the rehearsal techniques we used to use was role reversal, particularly if a scene between two characters was not coming together. When the Othello character took a shot at playing Iago, and vice versa, the actors would often awaken to a new understanding of the scene dynamic.

This playing with roles is the approach I'd like to suggest for this morning's story from the Gospel of Mark about the poor widow.

Let us set the scene: In the context of criticizing the religious elite for their ostentatious piety, Jesus sits down outside the temple treasury, to watch people deposit their donations.

Parenthetically, imagine if we did things that way. Instead of passing the plate at offering time, we could put a collection box right here at the end of the aisle, and I, or maybe stewardship chair Bill Neer, could sit and watch how much everyone puts in! If this were the case (and believe me, it never will be) you might expect that Bill or I would be especially pleased by people putting in checks with lots of commas and zeroes.

This is exactly what Jesus' disciples expected. They expected Jesus to be most pleased with the largest donations. But Jesus is unimpressed by the big bucks presented by the temple's "fat cats."

Instead, Jesus waits until a poor widow comes in and puts two ha-pennies in the box. Imagine the scene. In a day and age when money was always metal, the large gold coins of the rich people would have made a satisfying clunk falling into the collection slot. By contrast, the tinkle of the widow's coins would have been obviously tinny and weak.

Yet this is the donation that Jesus finds noteworthy. Jesus proclaims that the widow's piffling donation is greater than all the others, because she has given everything she has. She has not given what she can spare. She hasn't even settled for tithing, the 10% of her income that was standard in that day, and which today is held up as an ideal. She has given all she has. All she has to live on. Her rent money. Her food budget. Her rainy day savings. Her what-if-I-get-sick money.

Returning to our drama club exercise: now who wants to play the role of the widow? Does Jesus mean that we are to assume the role of the widow? At first blush, this looks like the case. We are not to be like the hypocritical and ostentatious scribes. We are to be like the humble and unselfish widow.

But how can we possibly assume this role? Who among us can give everything we have? Jesus asks many difficult things, but this is an *impossible* thing. The most

generous person I ever knew gave away 15% of his income, and that on an income of \$28,000 a year! But even he didn't give away *everything*.

Perhaps, in our drama club exercise, we need to step back and let someone else take the role of the widow. Who will take this role? Who even *can* take this role?

There is only one who can take the role of the widow. God. God gives everything. God gives everything God has for the world God created. God gives everything to redeem the world. God puts no limits on giving. God holds nothing back, not even God's own Son.

Whatever you think of the person of Jesus, understand this: Christianity stands for a God who stops at nothing to make us what we were made to be. The God we believe in even gives up God-ness for us, becoming human in the form of Jesus Christ. And Jesus stops at nothing to fulfill the Father's will, not even withholding the gift of his own life.

God alone gives everything. There is a prayer that says, "Not as the world gives, give you, O lover of souls." Human beings give in part. God gives all. God gives all to us, and for us. Imagine that. I mean it: hold in your imagination the concept of a being who gives everything for another. The closest we can maybe come is the idea of a mother giving her life for a child. God does that, and more. And continues to give: Often without any compensation or thanks or even recognition, much as the poor widow.

It's one thing to say that everything we have is a gift from God. That much is true. But the miracle is still greater. God gives everything God has to us. Having created, God's continuing mission is to redeem, and God stops at nothing to do this.

The story of the widow presents us with an enormity all right, but the enormity does not lie in what God expects of us. The enormity lies in the gifts we are given: not only in tangible goods, but also in love, freedom, redemption, healing, *life*. We are given all God has.

And the gifts keep coming.