

The Widow's Mite

Scripture: Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17 and Mark 12:38-44

I don't know about you, but I get very distressed with the news we get every day both locally and around the world. Tune in to Channel 10 and there is mayhem in the streets of some nearby community, and then go to the main news outlets and you hear of mass murders that seem to happen daily in countries we could not even spell a few months ago, and then there are the air disasters that affect so many people. These tales of disasters consume us and we forget about the local tragedies that exist at our doorstep. We can lose our sense of proportion with the mass numbers and the sheer excess of instances that appear in our daily news.

But it is in the very ordinary experience of life that very real tragedy can also strike – unnoticed by the media, but painful to ourselves and our small community. There is the death in the family, which tears apart a lifetime relationship between husband and wife. There is the hurt that can occur when there has been some family upset between children and parents. It is when the family is somehow broken apart by death and separation or altercation that we have a sense of despair at a very personal level, a despair with which we can empathize.

The two stories we read as lessons are about two such local tragedies. These stories are not about great world events, or about great heroes, or noble kings or princes; they are not about the great movements of history. Yet in all their ordinariness and simplicity they touch our lives many centuries later. The two stories are about two women who did not ask to become famous, who did not ask to be noted in the history books, yet their stories touch us greatly. These are stories about two women who lost their husbands and what happened to them afterwards.

The first story is about Ruth who had lost her husband. Her grief must have been palpable for her husband was of a foreign tribe and to have lost him was to have not only lost a loved one but to have lost her place in the community. It would have been easier for her to leave her mother-in-law Naomi and re-establish herself in her community. But even in her grief and with only uncertainty before her she stayed with Naomi and went off with her into a foreign land, into the unknown.

With grief in her heart she clung to the memory of her dead husband, but she turned that grief into a deep and abiding love which enabled her to help her mother-in-law. The wonderful thing about this tale is how Ruth is brought into the family and made once again the strength and stay not only of Naomi's life, but the life of the tribe.

Boaz, the kinsman of Naomi, accepts Ruth as his wife because he was willing to accept his duty as a kinsman. This was the way in which the living inheritance of the family was continued. Boaz had it in his power to refuse, and probably in time he would inherit greater wealth because of his refusal, but in accepting Ruth he gave her a future full of a promise that she had thought she had lost, and gave her a place in her new world.

The story of Ruth is a lovely tale on so many levels: Ruth's own filial love towards Naomi, then Naomi's generosity to Ruth in giving her freedom from any bonds of obligation that she might have felt. There is also Boaz' generosity of spirit that enabled the family line to continue. But the story also tells of the concern of the community towards one who had lost her husband. In a society in which the male was the dominant character, in which it was the male who represented security for the family, the loss of the husband was tragic beyond belief for it meant that the widow was to

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be torn from her place in the community and thrown into a life of emptiness with no status and no place within the social scheme of things. It was this abandonment that the practice of the adoption of the young widow by the nearest male family member was meant to avoid. Through Boaz' acceptance of Ruth as his wife she was given back her social standing again. Given the social structures of the day there was in this arrangement a clear sense of responsibility to the family as a whole. Above all through this act of generosity Ruth was given back her life.

What a bitter contrast we find in the second story, also a story about a widow. This story about the widow who throws her two mites into the collection plate is often told as a story to convince us that we should do what we can to give to the church. But this is not the point of this story. Jesus is not so much praising the widow for her gift so much as blaming the Pharisees and the guardians of the temple for her desperate poverty.

The circumstances had changed a good deal in the centuries following Ruth's experience. The rebuilding of the Temple had become all important and the gathering of money to accomplish this was all encompassing. One way of raising the money was to impose a death duty, so at his death a man's total wealth was taken as a tax to be paid to the temple and as a result the widow was left penniless and had to fend for herself. The widow not only lost her husband but also the means of sustaining herself. She would not have more than a couple of cents to her name by the time the Temple tax man had been around and without her husband she had no status in the society.

The story about the widow's mite comes in a long passage about the way in which the religious people of the day were using religion to give them social, economic and psychological support. In other words the Pharisees, who would be like those today who proclaim their religiousness to the housetops, were using religion for their own ends. They were even using their tax laws to support their own glorification rather than to see the tremendous need that existed around them. It was the Temple that gave them status and thus became the center of their lives. Whenever we feel that religion is nothing more than a prop for our own egos or our own social standing, we are acting like those Pharisees who were after Jesus' blood. They did not want him to upset their status quo. The widow's mite was the symbol of their greed and unconcern with the needs of the poor and the downtrodden.

But there is more than this suggested here. Wherever you find religion being used you find also that God is being ignored. The strange fact is that religion seems not to be in itself the way to God, but can actually be a hindrance in approaching Him. But how can that be?

To seek for a God that gives us power over others is to create a being in the image of ourselves at our very worst. Think of this kind of absolute ruler with all the trappings of power and might – a kind of absolute President without the checks and balances of Congress and Supreme Court, and you have a vision of God which many people think is religiously correct. But compare this fantastic vision of God with the God of pity and forgiveness that we find in the vision that Jesus gives us of God. There is infinite distance between these two visions.

Jesus was chiding the Pharisees because they could not see any further than their own dignity and their robes of office. They could only see the coin the widow dropped into the collection box, not seeing that it was their insensitivity that enabled her to have so little to give, and they did not see the widow's sacrifice in giving all that she had to the God she loved. In the lovely words of Blake's poem:

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Can I see another's woe,
And not be in sorrow too?
Can I see another's grief,
And not seek for kind relief?

As far as the Pharisees were concerned, they most certainly could ignore the grief. And the tragedy is that this is only too true for many of us who claim to stand firmly to our religious precepts. Too often that religiousness is nothing more than our self elevation into a kind of divine superiority.

What then should we understand about this gift of the widow – those small and insignificant two mites? We should see more than the monetary worth of the gift. We should ask ourselves if we have contributed to the poverty of the widow such that all she can do is to offer a sacrificial offering to support an edifice that had become little more than a glorification of another's selfishness.

It is worth reminding ourselves of the prophet Amos, that prophet of Israel who was a herder of sheep and who wanted to remain a shepherd. "I was no prophet," he said, "neither was I a prophet's son; but I was an herdsman, and a gatherer of sycamore fruit; and the Lord took me as I followed the flock, and the Lord said unto me, "Go prophesy unto my people Israel." Amos had no pretensions, no deep longing to be amongst the powerful, and no desire to wear splendid robes of office. Amos wanted only to be a quiet workman for God working away at his daily task with a conscientious love of his flocks.

His call was to a harder life, however, one in which he would have to stand up in public and speak unfriendly words to those in power, portraying them as power hungry despots. Amos was moved from the quiet life amongst the sheep and the goats to cry out against injustice. He did not ask for anything other than he should do all that was required of him.

Being faithful to God is sometimes harder than we had expected because we think that we should have something in return for our faithfulness. Just as the Pharisees thought that in return for all they did at the Temple they would get the reward of obedience from others. But, as Amos shows us, faithfulness is what we are obligated to without expectation of anything other than it is God's will for us.

Boaz, you remember, saw a widow's desperate need and took Ruth as his own and so made her a part of the family. What Jesus would have us do as we look about us in our daily lives is to seek out where we are needed and to act in his name so that we do what is required. We do this neither for profit, nor for glory or self-reward, but because we are God's children, all of us, and we are all part of one family of God. We should not take advantage of the weakness of others, nor would we think ourselves more important than others, for we are but the least of his children.

But can we take this seriously in this complicated world, this hard two-fisted world we live in today. How can we carry out the commandment to love and give where there is need? The only real guidance that can be given is that which places our heart and mind in their proper place and that we see ourselves honestly for what we are, that we acknowledge our own weakness and our own strengths. We must be like Amos and do what we understand has to be done for the glory of God and not for our own glory.

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This is a hard lesson for us to learn and it is not one that we can accept easily. It is easier to thank the widow for her small coin than to see what her real need is. In the words of a Christian mystic:

“Poor creature though I be, I am the hand and foot of Christ. I move my hand and my hand is wholly Christ’s hand, for deity is become inseparable one with me. I move my foot, and it is aglow with God.”

When we move in humility before the greatness of God we begin to see the world about us in such a different light. And it is in that light we begin to see the things we can do differently. No longer are we at center stage, but we place ourselves alongside the other person. And in that other person in need we can see God. For the other in need is God’s child too.

Blake in his poem puts it succinctly for us as he talks about Jesus:

He doth give His joy to all;
He becomes an infant small,
He becomes a man of woe,
He doth feel there sorrow too.

As he did this for us, we are to go and do likewise.

John S. Morris

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