

This message was delivered by Rev. Pamela Graf Short to the People of Prayer of the Tontogany Presbyterian Church on November eleventh, the twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost in the year of our LORD two thousand and eighteen. It is based on the two Bible stories below.

I Kings 17:8-16

8 Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying,

9 "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you."

10 So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink."

11 As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand."

12 But she said, "As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die."

13 Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son.

14 For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth."

15 She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days.

16 The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

Mark 12:38-44

35 While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, "How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David?"

36 David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared, "The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet." "

37 David himself calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?" And the large crowd was listening to him with delight.

38 As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,

39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!

40 They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums.

42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.

43 Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.

44 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."

Our Bible stories for today are stories of scarcity and sacrifice, obedience and trust.
The main character in each story is an unnamed widow;
one holds a few sticks in her hand,
the other—her only coins.
One with a child,
the other alone;
one a Gentile,
the other a Jew;
one with a voice,
the other mute;
both living in the midst of oppression
and both perhaps planning to die.

The oppression of the first came in the form of a famine.
The famine came as God's judgment on King Ahab, a king who preferred
idols to YHWH,
greed to generosity,
violence to understanding.

It never makes much sense to me to punish the whole creation and all the people because of the wickedness of the government, but that's the way it often happened in ancient times and happens in our own time.
In this case, the famine was so wide spread that Zarapath of Sidon, not even a part of the Kingdom of Israel, was drawn into the suffering as days and weeks and months and years passed without rain and without a drop of dew.

The oppression of the second widow has nothing to do with God's judgment or the lack of rain clouds.
Still, idolatry and greed and violence play their part.
The Kingdom of Israel is under Roman Rule now, and so, well, there is more oppression than can be outlined in one message. But Jesus never fusses about the Romans. Never.
He does however call out religious leaders on a regular basis. This time it is the scribes.

There were generally two types of scribes: one group functioned in the role of our modern day publishing houses. They were responsible to take the Bible and with the utmost care copy every letter and accent and vowel markings so that nothing was lost from the text, not even a jot or a tittle. These scrolls were then shared and read in various synagogues around the known world.

The second kind of scribe is a lawyer, one who draws up legal documents or works in the courts or government to write laws and such. It is likely that it is this second group that Jesus is calling out.

I don't know how you feel about Jesus' words about the scribes, but I fit a lot of these categories:
I have nice clothes...
and the best seat in church...
and surely some of you have fallen asleep while I say long prayers.
I would like to say that I do not devour widow's houses,
but the house I live in was a foreclosure from a woman who could not make her payments.
I felt bad about this, but did I say to the bank,
"Is there some way we can help this woman so she can move back into her home?"
No. Instead, I was happy to get the place at a discount.

We live within the structures of an economic system that make it easy to be oblivious of our role in the oppression of the poor,
the widow,
the orphan,
the child laborer,
the worker who makes \$0.13 an hour
to sew our shoes and purses
and put rivets in the lids of our pots and pans.

But this story calls us to beware;
be alert;
not only of our own behavior,
our own practices and motives,
but to also see,
to pay attention,
to look into the life of the one,
the lowly,
the poor,
the widow.

Do not assume that she has enough.
Do not assume that the way you choose to live has no effect on her ability to
make her house payment
or buy gasoline
or pick up the items on her grocery list
or pay her per capita to the church.

42 A poor widow came and threw in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.
And Jesus said “out of her poverty
She has put in everything she had,
all she had to live on.”

This could be translated “She put in everything she had—the whole of her living”.
By making this offering she was not only giving her last coin,
but she some think that she was giving her last breath;
that Jesus was pointing out that the system had not only devoured her house,
it was now devouring her life and she just threw it in with no further hope.

This might be right.

As the body of Christ,
we need to be aware of the utter despair that oppresses the poor and lonely.
For surely her story is being lived out in our cities and towns and in our schools and in our Presbytery
For days and weeks and months and years without a drop of hope.

Yet by pairing this woman’s story with our other widow, the widow of Zarapath,
there is another, more hopeful ending possible.

When we follow the two widows together,
we may very well be following risk takers,
walking behind practitioners of trust;
stepping in the footprints of specialists in imagination.

God told Elijah that God had commanded a woman in Zarapath to feed Elijah.
Though she shows no eagerness to do so;
though in this story she never claims any belief in the God of Elijah,
still, for some reason she feeds the prophet first.
She throws her last flour into a bowl;
she adds her last drop of oil,
she prepares the cake for Elijah
and instead of finding the jar bare and the jug empty,
she discovers that there is always enough,
always enough to feed her entire household.

Centuries later Jesus commends the widow of Zarapath,
not necessarily because of her faith,
but because she was willing to welcome a prophet;
willing to trust instead of hord;
willing to extend hospitality instead of hostility;
willing to give a stranger life in the face of her own death.

The widow at the temple gate has no voice, but her coins ring out across the centuries.
Was her offering resignation to the powers of her time?
Did she enter worship sighing and weeping silently before her death?
Or was it an act of freedom so joyful and so trusting that she went into worship praising God
and back out again stepping, dancing, knowing, believing that when she returned home she would receive
enough of what she needed?

This might be right.

And as the Body of Christ we do well to be aware of the utter freedom experienced by those who practice
radical, whole life trust.
For surely her story is being lived out
in Columbia and Lebanon,
in Toledo and Tontogany
for days and weeks and months and years with God showering enough of what is needed.

How do **you** think the temple widow's story ends?
In gloom or in joy?
How does your story end?
With resignation and despair?
With trust and obedience and hope and enough of what you need?

Who is God asking you to feed?
Do you feel the gaze of Jesus as you make your offerings?
What would you like Jesus to say as he sees your gifts?

Do we give God the "whole of our living"?
Do we even take time to ponder what the whole of our living might mean?

What if instead of beginning our week with the question, "now what do I have to do this week?"
We begin with a prayer
"Here is the whole of my week. I am tossing it into your treasury, God. It is yours."

What if instead of beginning our complaint with

“Did you hear how unreasonable he was?”

We begin with a prayer

“Here is the whole of my relationship. I am tossing into your bowl, God. It is your recipe to prepare.”

What if instead of beginning our bank balance with the question “Now where did that all go?”

We begin with a prayer

“Here is the whole of my income. I’m tossing it into your Kingdom, God. It is yours to return enough.”

Enough.

Let us trust that God will bring us enough.

Now may our God who looks on you with tender hope
The One who is aware of your despair
Provide for you a jar of meal that does not empty
and a jug of oil that does not fail.
And may our God who sees the whole of your living
Send you off in joyful praise
and rain on you
Kindness, generosity, satisfaction and peace
Now and forevermore. Amen