

A Sermon for Pentecost 23 at St. Timothy's Episcopal Church, November 8, 2009 by the Rev. Jan O'Neil, "Our Whole Life"

Based on the Revised Common Lectionary: 1 Kings 17:8-16; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44.

My two grandkids visited us here in October for a Baptism. They are almost one and almost three. I am sure you are grateful that I am not here to tell you how beautiful they are (ask me later), but, rather to report an observation. I watched them play. My conclusion: sharing is difficult. Morgan wanted her toys to herself and Cameron scooted as fast as he could to see if he could grab them. Morgan was best at grabbing them back. So I was reminded: sharing is difficult. Or is it? How about for you? Is sharing hard for you? For siblings? Your kids? Is sharing something taught? What are the facts about sharing and what are my editorials?

I did not attend journalism school, but as a high school counselor I helped a number of students who chose that route and I traveled with them through the process. My understanding is that in journalism school you learn many things including how to do street reporting—observing, gathering the facts, and reporting what you have seen. You also learn about editorials, your own voice, and about gathering opinions from others and interpreting them. When reading a newspaper, listening to news, watching documentaries, when reading our scriptures, sorting out voice, purpose, style is key in understanding the text.

Our Gospel story in Mark is brief today so let's look at it from this perspective. What is Mark's story? What is Jesus' story? When do we apply what we have learned in other scripture and in our lives to understand a given text?

Firstly, let's focus on the second part of the gospel lesson that I just read from Mark (there is a similar story in Luke): Mark describes Jesus sitting near the temple treasury watching various people put money in the temple box. Jesus says, "Many rich people put in large sums. An {unnamed} poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 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. 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.” Jesus is mostly reporting what he sees. He draws from his experience when he includes the contrasting words “poor” and “abundant”, setting a tone, but I am not alone in noticing that Jesus does not praise the fact that the woman gave everything she has. Jesus actually does not say whether her giving everything is good or bad. In fact, if we are talking about money then or now, we certainly might say that everyone who gives away literally all they had would be insane or nuts. Aren’t we supposed to do our best to take care of ourselves? Jesus does not glorify poverty here—poverty is difficult and he would like the system to eradicate it. Elsewhere in scripture we are asked to tithe or give proportionately in stewardship, which has definite spiritual rewards, but not to sacrifice ourselves and give up our last pennies that keep us alive. Also, notice that, in Mark, Jesus does not say the rich have not given enough—some gave a lot. These are clues that money may not be the topic here.

So if you can stay with me: in the second paragraph Jesus is mostly observing and reporting. Not true in the first paragraph and the opening lines of the gospel: here Jesus condemns the scribes who parade around wearing long robes and want special seats of honor. Aha, humility seems to be the issue here, not money. The pious scribes apparently have forgotten the message from the psalm today about God’s priority for the hungry, needy and the vulnerable widows. Instead the temple system devours the widows. The scribes are too big for their britches; their self importance has gone to their heads. On a small scale I am reminded when high school students came in my office in tears with stories: until Ben scored the winning touchdown he would stop and talk with me, now he’s too good for me; until Lisa got the lead in the school play she was my friend, now she doesn’t give me the time of day. On many levels, success, acclaim, power and seats of honor may corrupt, may lead to arrogance and short memories.

Remember, a few weeks ago Jesus even lambasted his disciples, James and John, who were seeking special seats in heaven. Perhaps here we can see ourselves at our worst in the scribes...or in the very human disciples. Don’t we all want recognition, special

treatment—we can see excesses in others—clergy, we aren't immune (we wear long robes, after all), in heroes; and as human beings don't we long to be favored, to be recognized. Don't we all fall short here on the humility scale?

If I don't recognize a bit of myself in the scribe then I am setting myself up to “bomb” as described by author Anne Lamott* in our Women's Book Group. It's so seductive to get full of ourselves when things are going well and to lose the humility of being human. But in the end we suffer too great of a loss...we lose ourselves.

Let's hold the uppity scribes aside here for a moment for insight into the widow in Mark, and, to help us do that, let's go back to the Old Testament lesson from Kings where Elijah is given food and water by another widow. She, who has only enough meal and oil to make enough bread to keep her and her son alive for one more day, trusts God enough to share the hearth cakes she makes with Elijah and miraculously there is enough food to go around to sustain this unnamed woman, her sick son, and Elijah – (no doubt a precursor the loaves and fishes stories in the New Testament). This widow risks her whole life by responding to God through Elijah.

To summarize, a widow in the Old Testament who shares her last bite of food (her life) and a widow in the New Testament who gives her last 2 coins (her life) transition us directly to what will come next in Mark. The passion of Christ: the climax of the story that is yet to come. Jesus gives up everything—literally his whole life for God's love and for God's love for us—he empties himself, going to the “insane” extreme of giving up himself to God for the promise of new life for us.

God lures us, begs us to give up symbolically our whole life, to have a circumcision of the heart—to do God's work, to be God's hearts and hands in the world. Giving up our lives brings a radical transformation that means that we realize when there is poverty anywhere, we too are impoverished, when there is an undereducated woman or man anywhere, we too are ignorant. As Christians we have no viable choice but to work for change. We are in this together—it is not “they” but “us”. In the end Mark and Jesus are

not talking about money but about giving up our very being to be transformed by God's abundant love that gives us Jesus to, in turn, give away to others. Some editors say that such conversion is "nuts." I suggest that it's wholeness and salvation.

Ava Christine Becker will be baptized in a few minutes into our midst, in God's presence. This is a fact. My editorial: this is monumental, breathtaking. Her parents and godparents are placing her whole life in God's hands, promising for Ava "to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving her neighbor as herself, striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being."** In Baptism we trust in all of God's promises that in Christ God is offering Ava a life of abundance and transformation while asking us to be God's hands and heart to support her to grow in God's love, in our community.

God asks us not for all our money but for our whole life. We are left with God's questions: Is it hard to share? How much of myself, my life can I share? With God? And these questions are the facts. Amen.

**Traveling Mercies*

***Book of Common Prayer*