

11/08/2015 - Pentecost 24

“Saintly Living: Giving” - Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: 1 Kings 17:8-16; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

Today is Stewardship Sunday, not just for our church, but for many churches. I hope all of you will join us downstairs for our luncheon following the service today as well. In the lectionary for Stewardship Sunday, we hear the story of the widow with two copper coins giving all she has at the synagogue. As Jesus and the disciples observe, the wealthy put in great sums of money, while this woman gives very little. Jesus then says, *“They have contributed out of their abundance, but she has contributed out of her impoverishment.”* In typical Markan style, we are left to infer for ourselves what Jesus is trying to teach us here.

The tradition tells you and I that this is an example of how we should give to the church. That is why it is used on Stewardship Sunday. You and I should be like this widow and ‘give until it hurts’, or some other variation of that theme.

Well, you are not going to hear that message from me, because I think it is precisely the wrong message. Before I tell you why that interpretation is wrong, we need to read the story of the widow and her copper coins in conjunction with what has gone before and what comes after the story. At the beginning of our reading, Jesus excoriates the scribes. The scribes were well-paid for their work, and that is why they had expensive long robes and sat in the best seats in the synagogue. When we read Jesus’ condemnation of them in relationship to the widow, we now hear the giving by the wealthy, probably the scribes, is for the sake of maintaining status and power, and also for the sake of maintaining the status quo, the power structures of the day. They do this so that people might see them giving “great sums” and fawn over them and thereby maintain their status among the people. Then Jesus takes the disciples to observe the widow. This is followed by the beginning of the next chapter when Jesus says the very structure of the temple will be taken apart.

So if the wealthy are giving to the temple to maintain status and power and existing structures that maintain that status and power, then what is motivating the widow’s giving, the giving of everything she has? It can’t be power and status, nor can it be to maintain the existing power structures. She has been rejected by all of those and even so gives everything. I think the reason she gives is the same reason the widow who allows Elijah to stay with her gives of her last grain to bake bread for a guest. In the story with Elijah, by giving of her last grain, the widow learns of the vast loving kindness of the Lord by serving Elijah. The widow whom Jesus and the disciples are watching is also, I believe, giving because she believes in the loving kindness of the Lord. She is giving as an act of kindness, not as an attempt to uphold institutions, or to maintain power and status, or so that others might admire her. It is a quiet, invisible, small act of trust in the God who gives and loves and shares with God’s people.

GIVING AS AN ACT OF KINDNESS

Leon Logothetis¹ was working as a stock analyst in London, England. He lived his working life behind a “slab of wood”, as he says, and in front of a computer screen all day long. With each passing day, he felt more and more disconnected from the world and from friends and family. One day, he went to see the movie *The Motorcycle Diaries*, which is about a journey Che Guevara took across South America, where he relied completely on the kindness of strangers. This woke Leon up and he left his job in London and came to America to see if he could travel from New York City to Hollywood relying solely on the kindness of strangers. He did this with only \$5 in his pocket upon the start of his journey.

Leon made the trip and was astonished at the magnitude of generosity and kindness he encountered along the way. He stayed with homeless people, was helped by people who could barely provide for themselves, was given food and rest by wealthy and poor alike all the way across the nation. It is quite a story. His book detailing the journey is called *Amazing Adventures of a Nobody*.

Based on the success of that book, Leon now travels the world as an ambassador of kindness. He had a TV show for a while where he went around looking for people to show kindness to, or examples of kindness to follow up on. His newest project is called #GOBEKIND. If you go onto YouTube, you will find the first few episodes of the project.

I am using Leon Logothetis as an example because he has done what I believe we are called to do throughout the Gospels. Leon has tied giving to kindness. The work of kindness is actually quite prevalent, but we have to look for it, we have to make it happen. I believe many people will be kind if given the opportunity to show kindness. Cultures, societies, institutions, politics and governments often are not kind, and, in fact, are quite mean. But people, as individuals, want and seek kindness for the most part.

Leon looks for people who seem to be radiating pain or loneliness. He has been doing this long enough that he has intentionally attuned himself to this quality in other people. Being attuned to the pain and loneliness in others gives him the opportunity to share the kindness that was shown him in his travels across the US, a journey he made out of his own pain and loneliness. The difference between Leon and myself, for instance, is that he is willing to wade into the pain and loneliness, ask questions, and have a conversation.

This brings us back to the widow and how we can relate to her today. Leon deals with many people who have fallen through the cracks in our society, or people who have suffered because of some failure in their family, their lives, or in our culture - people like the widow in today's reading. When we are trying to find out what all this means related to giving and how the widow relates to us, we would do well to remember Exodus 22, which says, ²²*You shall not abuse any widow or orphan.* ²³*If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry...* The protection of widows and orphans is a theme throughout the Old Testament, and it is the subject of one of the very first “all church meetings” in the early church, in the Book of Acts. The light of Israel to the world shines brightest when the orphans and widows are cared for. The judgment against the people of God is at its greatest when they suffer. And this is the root of the problem with focusing on the widow as the example of good giving and stewardship.

¹ See <http://www.leonlogothetis.com/> for information on Leon's books, projects, documentaries and television work.

Instead, in the story with Elijah and with Jesus and the disciples, the widow is an example of the total failure of the power structure to care for those whom God has so called us to care for. This is not a story of the widow's giving, but the giving of the wealthy. Mark simply lets the image of the widow stand. The surrounding story is meant to carry the meaning, and the meaning is this:

What has been done in the worship of Israel, in the day and age of Jesus, *that a widow has only two copper coins to give?*

What has been done that giving, which is meant to be a reflection of the loving kindness of God, is now a status symbol and a way to maintain a government, a social system, a transfer of wealth which consistently keeps the widow and the orphan down?

What has been done that, for all we give, so many do not have what they need?

The problem is that Elijah's widow only has a day of grain left and is planning to die. The issue here is that the widow *only has two coins*. The problem for us, in the same way, are all those our economy and our systems have pushed out onto the streets and into shelters and out of meaningful work.

We must understand that the outcome of these destructive systems impact *individuals* directly. No political solution, no grand institutional plan, no rerouting of monetary aid can help until a personal connection is made with those who suffer. Are we willing, like Leon Logothetis, to see the pain and loneliness and suffering, and then make the approach to have a conversation? Sometimes, this is all that is wanted and needed - the touch of human kindness. A caring ear to hear, a willingness to listen to their story, and a kind word in support of the one who suffers. Sometimes, a greater opportunity to help, to be kind also in our giving, might arise. But we must seek out the individual and seek out the opportunity for kindness.

We have set up *giving* to be in opposition to *having*, and in doing so we are making the same move as the Scribes in our story today. For the widow, giving is simply a way of being, because for the widow, there is no separation between *giving* and *having*. Only when what we have is about supporting institutions and about our status and our position and fulfilling our desires does giving oppose having. In our culture, we make a false separation between giving and having; they are not opposites of one another. They only appear in opposition because giving and having are different sides of the same coin. The coin upon which giving and having depend is the loving kindness of God.

The kindness and mercy of God provides for the widow and her son, and for Elijah, who moves in with them as an object lesson in the provision, care and kindness of God. The kindness and mercy of God is central to the widow who gives to the treasury as Jesus and the disciples watch. For the scribes, though, it is having, it is personal gain, it is maintaining the power structures which the rich men seek to uphold in their giving.

Just recently, Leon Logothetis, in his #GOBEKIND movement, found a man in Denver who had been promised an apartment and a job. So he moved there with his 4 year old son only to find both the apartment and the job had been given to someone else. Now, this man and his son were homeless and living out of their car. The man had an exceptional attitude toward the whole experience, but I have to tell you that this happens all the time here on the Midcoast -

people are promised work and then when they arrive, they have nothing. Employers and landlords do this because they can. Because this was on the internet, though, and because Leon gave this man \$1000, plus a week in a hotel, this man and his son are now moving into a new apartment, have been given a new car because someone started a GoFundMe site for him, and he has job offers. This is kindness at work. This is kindness seeking to overcome broken systems. This is giving that works.

When we understand that Jesus is attempting to undermine and deconstruct destructive and abusive power structures, we begin to see that the problem with giving and what these Bible stories mean isn't a money problem, though money might help quite a bit. The issue is a mindset problem. This is what Leon Logothetis and many others are trying to change. When we adopt a mindset that seeks kindness in the world, we begin to see individuals and their needs from the perspective of God's mercy, love and provision. The degree to which our thinking and our care of today's widows and orphans is consumed by political solutions, judgmental solutions which lock people out of the possibility for meaningful work, and spiritual systems which reinforce the status quo is the degree to which we have separated ourselves from the loving kindness of God.

Really, this was all a long way around to saying that Stewardship and pledging in our church is not about money, finally, though money pays for salaries and upkeep of this beautiful building and your time, talent and treasure allows us to do many things through our presence in the community. Money can be the energy of kindness in this world, because in our world right now, the energy of worldly exchange is made real by the transfer of money. And so it helps. But it is, finally, not about having money or giving money. It is about finding ways of expressing God's love, mercy and kindness in a world that sorely needs it. How shall we do that as a church and as individuals? As Leon Logothetis says, "*Kindness is more than just medicine. The act of giving and receiving is where the real magic of human experience resides.*"

Stewardship and giving, then, in light of the widows in our stories today, are actually the things we do as a church and as followers of Christ which shatter and destroy those systems which create suffering for the widow and the orphan, the homeless and the suffering, the sick and the broken. And our stewardship and giving are the results of the gift of God's loving kindness to us and to others through the power of the Holy Spirit, who counts kindness and love as primary gifts of those who follow Christ. So, based on the inspiration of Leon Logothetis and in the spirit of Christ, *Go Be Kind.*