

Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost  
Proper 27  
Year B

1 Kings 17:8-16  
Psalm 146  
Hebrews 9:24-28  
Mark 12:38-44

Most of the Gospel according to Mark focuses on the mighty acts of Jesus, the miracles. However, along with the fourth chapter, the twelfth chapter focuses on the teachings of Jesus. We see the parable of the vineyard, which the Pharisees rightly interpret as condemnation of them, and a series of short teachings in the Temple covering such diverse topics as paying taxes to Caesar, the resurrection, the Great Commandment, and the question about David's son.

In today's reading, we have two more incidents of teaching - a warning about the ostentatiousness of the leaders of the Israelites and an interesting observation of a widow's offering. We might wonder what these two tales have in common or why Mark puts them together in this reading.

Many will look at these as contrasts in how people approach God. On the one hand are the leaders who pride themselves in showing off their prestigious positions, while on the other hand we have a poor widow offering the merest gift to God's Kingdom. If we focus on these materialistic differences, we will come to an understanding of superficial piety vs superficial humility. We might see an example of liturgical overkill contrasted with self-sacrificial offering.

There is, however, another way of looking at this. Instead of focusing on the piety of the widow, who we try to place on the pedestal of virtue because she gifts her last penny to God, and contrasting that with the large, but personally insignificant gifts of the wealthy, let us look at the significance of what sacrifice might really mean.

Each year during Lent, we are called upon to sacrifice, or give up, something we enjoy. Frequently, we give up our favorite food, beverage, or activity for the forty days of Lent and call that a sacrifice to God. If we want to find examples of greater sacrifice, we might look to those who give up the comforts we all enjoy - air conditioning, cars, ample food - to go to some mission field to ministry to the less fortunate. We might look to Mother Teresa, those who have lost family members in war, or those who elect to teach in inner-city schools instead of the nicer jobs in the suburbs. That is our idea of sacrifice. But, is that how Jesus views sacrifice?

We read that the widow gave her last penny to the Temple, yet in the next passage in this Gospel, we will see Jesus predicting the demise of this glorious building. Is the widow's gift a futile attempt to stave off the downfall of the Jewish religion? That is one take on this story. However, when combined with the reading from 1 Kings, we see another aspect of this story. We see an example of trust in God. In both of these stories, we see poor women giving the last of their resources to God, trusting that God will supply their needs to go on in life. We see deep acts of faith that, even though they are giving up everything they have, God will sustain them.

This is the same faith we see later in the Gospel as Jesus prays in the Garden. Here also, Jesus is offering up everything He has - His ministry, His friends, His life - for the fulfillment of God's plan. It is, for both the widows and Jesus, an offering of all they have to others. The widow in 1 Kings shared her last flour and oil with the prophet. The widow in the Temple shared her last coins with the religious establishment. Jesus shared His Body and Blood with us, as we remember each week in the Eucharist.

How might we share our gifts with others? More than dropping a check into the plate when we come in, or bringing food on Wednesday evening, we can explore what it means to give our all like these we read about. Visualize yourself as those coins being dropped into the Temple treasury. Are you being given as an offering into a dying religious edifice or are you the representation of great faith that God will take that offering and use it to improve the lives of others? Instead of focusing on our shortcomings and inadequacies, let our faith project the greatness of God in creation, in all that God is doing through our meager gifts. We pray each week for God to send us out to spread God's message of love to all people. Let us continue in the faith that God is honoring our work and using our little coins of faith to do great things.