

The Widow's Might

Picture this. It was a mild Sabbath morning in Jerusalem. The sun had come up in the east and people were lined up along the dusty road which led to the temple. In that slow moving line, there were rich and poor alike. They carried their monetary offerings to present to the Lord God Jehovah. There was a familiar smoky smell in the air from burned animals. They had been sacrificed on the altar by the priests according to their customs.

The line led to a small square room lined with metal collection boxes. The boxes had metal horns extending out of them to receive the offerings and were called "trumpets" because of their shape. The coins made a constant clanging clatter as they were cast into the boxes. The worshippers shuffled along to make their deposit and move on. In Tanzania their custom of giving was to walk up to the front of the sanctuary to give their offering, 3 times during the service.

Jesus, who had given his offering, stood over in the corner with some of his followers. Notice that the text does not say Jesus was watching what everyone gave but rather, how the people put the money into the box. Jesus was not the only one watching. Several priests were responsible for supervising the collection process.

As the wealthy folks proudly dropped their many coins into the trumpet, creating a loud clang, they seemed to draw admiring glances from the priests. Their sound of their generosity of many coins was

noticeable. No one seemed to pay any attention to the frail looking little woman who entered the room. Only Jesus saw her coming toward the boxes. She stopped at the trumpet, reached into her tiny purse and carefully drew out 2 small coins. They were mites, the smallest currency used by the Romans. She tossed both of these lightweight coins into the big metal box, the sound barely recognizable to those in the room.

Jesus knew all about this widow and was impressed by what he saw. In fact he was so impressed that he confessed to his disciples that her offerings were far more significant than those made by men of wealth and prestige. He recognized her humble giving by teaching the disciples about her sacrifice. This episode has been permanently recorded in the Gospels of Mark and Luke. Jesus insured her story would be used for all of eternity for all to learn about giving one's all.

Isn't it a strange and lovely thing that the person whom the NT and Jesus handed down to history as a pattern of generous giving is a widow who gave $\frac{1}{2}$ a farthing? We may feel that we don't have much to give of our gifts and talents. But if we give our all, God can do wondrous things with our gifts and with our lives.

I have been thinking about this gospel for several weeks trying to come up with a way to share it in a meaningful way. The widow gave all she had. How can I talk about giving all I have?

On Tuesday of this week, I went to a conference at Advocate Hope Children's Hospital in Oak Lawn. The subject was dealing with grief

from the loss of a child or children. It was a powerful day. Professionals who deal with premature newborns and critically ill children presented information about their roles at the hospital in caring for these children and their families. Many shared the difficulty of being present with the grief of others.

They gave us a handout recalling the story of the Wizard of Oz, a story that most of you know. The moral of the story is that the lion had courage before he received the medal; the scarecrow was smart before he received his diploma and the tin man had a heart and feelings before he had the clock ticking in his chest. Everyone has what they need to be brave and smart and loving, even when we don't think so.

At this time in my life, I am pretty good with folks who are dealing with losses both real and perceived. What shook me to my very core day was the realization of what a lousy sister I have been. For the sake of time this morning, I will give you the Readers Digest version of this story. In 1972 my sister Sharon died very suddenly from acute infectious hepatitis. She was 31 years old. My youngest sister, Rosemary who was 25, was very close to Sharon. They lived close to each other because neither of them had left the town in which we were born. Sharon had a very difficult few years before she died. My mother would call periodically and her first words would be, "Guess what she did now!" So when she died, I and others said, "She is better off now."

I was the big sister. I helped my parents make the funeral arrangements. I took charge of plans; what she would wear; whether or not her two boys should be at the funeral and so on. You see, growing up, Sharon had been the cute one with her charming smile and blond curly hair. Maybe I was calloused and uncaring back then. I do not remember crying or making any effort to comfort Rosemary or even my parents. That was just the beginning of losses for Rosemary. We all went on with our lives.

After a motorcycle accident in which she broke her hip, her 3 girls were taken away from her because she was not physically able to take care of them. A few years later her fiancée died in another tragic motorcycle accident. I don't even remember going to Steve's funeral.

Ten years ago her middle daughter was killed in an automobile accident. Ironically it was not far from where Steve was killed. This funeral I did attend and I believe I was present for her. I even had a very difficult confrontation with my mother's Missouri synod pastor. But that is a story for another time. Unlike the medical staff at Hope hospital are present and caring for their grieving families, I didn't take the time to find out what she needed from me. I was busy with my own life. Not only didn't I come close to giving her all that I had, I didn't give her anything.

Why do I tell you this? I believe it is because I just realized that for the past 37 years, I failed my only sister. This Gospel text along with the conference convicted me. I have been so busy with my own

stuff, that I did not see the need in my sister. I was like the priests watching the rich folks give of their excess. I failed to see the need of the one who was in need. I was so wrapped up in my own life, that I missed a number of opportunities to give my all to my own flesh and blood; my baby sister. Driving home from the conference, I felt like I had been hit over the head with a 2 by 4.

What does giving my all by walking the walk look like in my life and in yours? How is my walk different because faith in Jesus is the most important thing in my life? How might we allocate resources differently not only in our homes but also in our congregation in order to better accomplish the work that God is calling us to do?

God's life giving mission is to change and save lives, whatever it takes. Our mission at LCM is to live Christ's message. A noted Catholic philosopher, Jean Vanier wrote the following about mission. "Mission is revealing to other their fundamental beauty, value and importance in the universe, their capacity to love, to grow and to do beautiful things and to meet God. Mission is transmitting to people a new inner freedom and hope; it is unlocking the doors of their being so that new energies can flow; it is taking away from their shoulders the terrible yoke of fear and guilt. To give life to people is to reveal to them that they are loved just as they are, by God, with the mixture of good and evil, light and darkness that is in them: that the stone in front of their tomb in which all the dirt of their lives has been hidden, can be rolled away. They are forgiven; they can live in freedom."

Real giving must be sacrificial. The amount we give is not its value rather it is whether it is all that we can generously, sacrificially give. In Jesus' day, widows represented the poor and vulnerable of society. In Jesus' stories widows also represented the generous. What did they know that engendered such generosity? Perhaps it was their dependence on God's good gifts for daily life and meaning. Perhaps it was their sensitivity to all in need. Maybe they were just more grateful for God's abundance.

We have been talking about stewardship for the past 6 weeks. Through our stewardship program this fall, we have learned about the many wonderful ministries that you as the church have supported. Today you have a chance if you haven't already done so, to make a financial commitment to continue to support those ministries. So far the pledges we have received, aren't enough to pay the staff for the coming year. We can't pay the bills without money!

Isn't it a strange and lovely thing that the person whom the NT and Jesus handed down to history as a pattern of generosity was a person who gave a gift of half a farthing. She gave all that she had. If we put all that we have and are at God's disposal, God can do things with it and with us that are beyond our imaginings.

I cry out to God, "Instill within me the faith to believe that your generosity is sufficient for this day. Give me the heart of this widow to share from your abundance." Amen

