



## Letting Go and Moving On

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field*

*The twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost ~ November 8, 2009*

Mark 12:38-44

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 market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'

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

I just have to say at the start, this Gospel passage makes me very nervous. Here I stand, wearing a long robe, sitting in a place of honor in our version of the synagogue. And once we leave the subject of places of honor in this passage there isn't much relief because we move right on to giving all that we have-all we have to live on. So this is one long discomfort-making passage.

In the Hebrew Scripture we encounter Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath. Elijah is on the run, a wanted prophet, with a bounty on his head. He has dared to proclaim in the name of the God of the Israelites rather than Baal, the god of the Queen, Jezebel. He is afraid for his life because he knows there is a price on it. And the widow is afraid because she knows there is a price of sorts on her head. Not because she is being hunted by a king or queen, but because she is hunted by a system of injustice- a system that left widows to fend for themselves. So she and her son are about to starve to death. And she goes off to find food to make what she knows will be their last meal. Then Elijah shows up and tries to mooch some food off her as well as get a place to hide out from the king's soldiers, further endangering her and her son. The widow doesn't turn him down flat but she quickly points out that there is only food enough for her and her son. Not to worry says Elijah, God will take care of it. I, for one, think the widow would have been justified in telling Elijah to find his food elsewhere- or even something more strongly worded- but she doesn't do that. Remarkably, she trusts that this man of God speaks the truth. And she gives him what she has.

And then of course there is the widow in Mark's telling of Jesus' story. The quiet nameless woman who makes her way to the treasury box after all those of high esteem have paraded and trumpeted their way forward, making a great show of putting their offering in the box, sometimes giving large sums of money, although a small fraction of what they possess. She, the quiet one, is the one Jesus notices-the one who puts everything she has into the box-who risks her very life by putting all that stands between her and probable starvation into the treasury. Preachers have long talked about this woman's sacrifice and based on it urged others to tithe, give 10% to the church. But I think that is wildly off base- the woman doesn't put 10% of what she has into the box, she puts all she has, puts herself, into the box. That is what grabs Jesus' attention. Maybe because just a few short days after this scene unfolds, Jesus will be hanging on a cross, a dying outcast. So perhaps in her he sees a kindred spirit, one who is quite willing to lay it all on the line, who empties herself just as he is about to empty himself of all that he has and is, of his very life.

The thread that holds these three stories, 2 widows and Jesus, together, is trust. At heart these stories are about the placement of ultimate trust. These two women, and Jesus, clearly place their ultimate trust in God. But what about us? In what do we trust?

If you take out your wallet and look at a dollar bill, it proclaims, "in God we trust". Our money tells us we trust in

God. Does anyone else see something deeply ironic in that? Because I, for one, tend to behave as if it is in the dollar I trust. Like much of the western world I am enmeshed and entrenched in a consumer culture that quite literally, consumes- consumes me and everyone and everything else. We even label ourselves and others, the beloved children of God, God's precious ones, as consumers, reducing the dignity of human nature to some sort of ravenous machine. So while saying we trust in God, it seems we really put our trust in consumerism, in an economic system. Working to have things, cars, houses, to go to the best colleges, to have as much as we can saved up to ensure that we will be OK. And in the process we chew up the earth's resources, chew up each other and chew up our spirits. Part of us is afraid, knowing we are on some sort of hamster wheel –frantically running yet never actually getting anywhere. Afraid to stop running, stop accumulating the things that will keep us safe, the things in which we trust. And all the while we know, we know, that what we are doing, all the stuff we are accumulating, all the damage we are doing to ourselves and to the earth itself, is not sustainable. We know that the system will collapse, and so we run harder and we try to make sure there is enough for at least us to get by, even if everyone else doesn't make it. Part of us knows we are living something of a lie. And this is what Jesus railed against so many times- not that money itself is evil, that things are evil, certainly not that the temple was evil, but he railed against a system built on lies, fear and deception, in which the rich took care of themselves and didn't give a hoot what happened to anyone else. A system in which the religious elite wielded and abused power and excluded people, taking over the estate of widows and leaving them to starve and deciding certain groups were outcasts and untouchable. He railed against a system in which the government was concerned with creating and consolidating as much wealth and power as possible, not caring if the majority of people were left out of this circle of wealth and power. In short, he railed against a system disturbingly similar to ours.

So what are we to do?

I recently had the great pleasure of hearing Dr. Tony Campolo speak. Campolo is a Baptist preacher, professor of sociology and one of the leaders of the Red Letter Christians, a new breed of evangelical Christian. And it is from Tony that the inspiration and much of the material for this sermon came. Nobody can pump up a crowd quite like Tony, and nobody can make you leave a speech feeling both thoroughly energized and thoroughly chastened the way Tony can. Tony told a story about a few of his students at Eastern University. These students, including Shane Claiborne, who spoke here a few years ago, listened to Tony preach and teach about discipleship, about Kingdom living, about giving all they had away and trusting solely in God. And they thought he might mean it. So they founded a so-called New Monasticism- a series of communities called The Simple Way in which they own no possessions but live in community depending on each other and others for their food and shelter. Someone from the magazine Christianity Today was interviewing the students who were giving Tony credit for changing their lives and inspiring them to live out Jesus' teaching. And, as Tony tells the story, he was feeling pretty darn proud as he read the article. And then, and then, he read down the page to the part where the students said, "well, you know Tony himself can't live this way- he just couldn't bring himself to do this, but we can." Ouch.

The Bible indicates we should give all we have away, but I have to tell you I don't think I can do that- in fact, I am pretty sure I can't do that. And I am going to go out on a limb and guess that most of you are thinking the same thing. We, like Tony, just can't quite do that. But just because we can't give it all away doesn't mean we can't do anything at all. As Campolo says "What we can do is what we can do." We can simplify how we live, taking less from the earth and being more careful caretakers of this gift of a planet. We can give more of ourselves to others. We can give more of our treasure to others. We can take a few steps to simplify our lives, whether that looks like changing our will, buying only fair trade goods, cutting things from our schedules and so on. And if enough of us do that we can slowly change the system. We can take steps along the road of living by faith. We can be further tomorrow than we are today, although maybe not quite yet where we might want to be. And that is OK. We can focus on what we can and are willing to do, rather than spending our time worrying and moaning about what we can't do. I, for one, am committing myself to taking a fuel fast once a week, not driving at all for one day- and while that might sound easy to you city dwellers, it is not quite so easy for those of us in the 'burbs where everything is 10 miles away. And I am committing that my next car, when my current car wears out, will be a low emissions, high fuel efficiency vehicle. So if anyone knows where I can get a good used Prius or Civic hybrid, let me know. I am committing to changing my will-leaving more to the church and to a few charities I love. I am committing to continuing to increase what I give to the church every year. Those are just my ways of trying to move a little further on down the road. You will have your ways, but whatever they are I ask you to join me. And together we can carry on down that road a step at a time, knowing that we walk in faith. Knowing that, thank God, God's love for us does not depend on how fast we go down that path, that it will not be withdrawn when we screw up, because we will screw up. We can trust that God loves us and is with us because of who God is not because of what we do. That whatever steps we take on the journey will delight the God who created us in love and just thinks each of us is the coolest thing ever. And if that isn't enough to calm some of our fears, make us a little less nervous, and help us let go and trust, if that isn't Good News, I don't know what is.