

**The Rev. Jon Hauerwas – November 7, 2021 – A Call to Service
Psalm 127:1-2 and Mark 12:28-34, 41-44**

When we speak about the accomplishments of others, particularly when someone goes above and beyond, we say that “they gave it their all.” That they left it all out on the field. Their physical strength. Their mental toughness. Their emotional investment. Their intellectual jostling. “She really has heart,” we say. “She persevered. She never gave up. Until the very end, it was as if she was leading a master class in excellence in which we each became the students.”

These are the moments that inspire us. That challenge us. That make us want to dig just a little bit deeper. To go just a little bit further. To expand our capacity to exceed expectations. The pursuit of excellence is the mindset upon which lasting brands are built and athletic achievements are anchored. Yes. Time and time again, this is the formula for rising to the top.

Yet, curiously, the kind of greatness that Jesus highlights is rarely front and center. Instead, it is often understated. Buried on the last page of the newspaper. A mere footnote in an article. Hardly worth the attention of a film crew.

In our gospel lesson this morning, the attention is squarely focused on the chief benefactors of the Jewish faith. All eyes are fixed on the wealthy elites who rise to contribute their sizeable offerings to a religious institution professing its allegiance to the one true God. By sharing from their abundance, the elites signal to the rest of the community that they care about the needs of the less fortunate. That they are committed to acts of justice. And that they are worthy of the honor that society bestows upon them on account of their wealth and privilege.

Yet, as he so often does, Jesus invites us to look elsewhere. On the margins, where life is more tenuous. Among the poor, where honor is lacking. And to see in the faces and in the actions of those long forgotten signs of incredible strength and faith, in order that we might draw our inspiration from them. On this occasion, he directs our attention to a poor widow. “Her husband is dead; she has no voice in that culture, no income, nothing. She is totally vulnerable.”¹ And we soon realize that if Jesus had not pointed her out in the crowd, we wouldn’t even know that she existed.

The text tells us that, in an incredible act of faith, this woman places all that she has into the treasury. There is no million-dollar bequest that she has been

¹ Theodore J. Wardlaw, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 3*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 471.

safeguarding until her last breath. No. This woman presents all that she has right now. All that she has to live on. The amount is so insignificant that it is hard for us to imagine.

So for some perspective here, I want to remind you of the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. You may recall that the landowner hired workers at the beginning of the day and promised them the usual daily wage. He then hired additional workers at various other times during the day, promising to pay them whatever was fair. But the parable takes a surprise twist when, at the end of the day, each laborer receives the same payment. One denarius. The usual daily wage for an unskilled laborer, whether they had toiled away for one hour or for ten.

Now get this. In our second lesson this morning, these two, small copper coins that the poor widow gave to the Jewish treasury were worth one penny. That's 7/10ths of one percent of one denarius.² And, yet, despite the seeming insignificance of this woman's offering, Jesus commends her gift as being of more valuable than all of the others. Here scripture reads like a parable enacted, in which an unlikely hero emerges from the margins to claim her status as an exemplar of faithfulness.

² Wardlaw, 470.

Even so, she does so quietly. Without fanfare or even a word of thanks. There are no cameras. No reporters. No spotlights. We never learn her name. In the end, we are left with the impression that she never even interacted with Jesus. Instead, he praises her devotion, her integrity, and her good intentions from afar. And this one act becomes a metaphor for her life of self-giving.

Friends, as we gather in worship today, we all recognize that no institution is perfect. That's because every organization is guided by fallible human creatures. Therefore, as much as it pains us to admit it, there will always be hypocrisy in the church. And there always will be occasions when the church and its leaders let us down. Yet, in the example of this poor widow, we find one who, "in the midst of all of the things that are not quite right, chooses nonetheless to give and be faithful to a vision of something bigger than what she can now see."³ This is the bold witness of faith.

Theodore Wardlaw serves as the president of the Presbyterian seminary in Austin, Texas. He writes, "What does it mean to care enough about an institution, however human it is, that you stubbornly decide not to abandon it and instead dedicate yourself to a vision of what it might be at its best, rather than what it is at

³ Wardlaw, 471.

its worst? What does it mean for you to come to church – week after week and year after year – with your cans for the homeless... and your willingness to sign up for this or that task force focused on this or that justice issue” in the midst of financial and security concerns? ⁴

Today’s scripture challenges us to give, not to a perfect institution, but to a broken one. And it calls us to share our gifts, not only with those who recognize and appreciate efforts, but with all people. To give in such a manner runs counter to our desire to control others and to dictate outcomes, and places us in a position of trust from which we are able to see God’s blessings increase and flow.

Today, on my final Sunday with you, I want to encourage you to never stop giving. To know that your gifts matter. And to notice those people who go about the business of discipleship from a place of humility, which God accounts as righteousness. Be kind to one another. Seek the best interest of the other. And may God be with you all until we meet again.

⁴ Wardlaw, 471.