

Chaplaincy of St. George's
12 November 2006
23rd Sunday in Pentecost
The Rev. Dr. Karen Wacome, Presiding
Dr. Donald Wacome, Lay Preaching

1 Kings 17.8-16
Psalm 146
Hebrews 9.24-28
Mark 12.38-44

*May the words of my mouth
And the meditations of our hearts
Be acceptable in your sight, O God,
Our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.*

Nothing for God

Truly I tell you, this poor woman has put in more than all who are contributing to the treasury. Mark 12.43

It's better to give everything you've got, even if it's not much, than to give a lot when you have so much that you don't miss it. I'm sure that's true, but I doubt that it's the main point of what Jesus says here. It fits with the conventional idea of Jesus the pious, the moral teacher who goes around dispensing edifying lessons, the religious reformer preaching sincere devotion over against formalism and hypocrisy. But I don't think it fits with the real Jesus who engages our attention here, the strange and dangerous character whose visit to the Jerusalem temple is one provocation to the authorities after another.

Consider, first, where Mark locates this little scene in his narrative of Jesus' assault on the temple. In the preceding chapter (Mark 11.15-18), Jesus pushes over the tables of the moneychangers and of the people selling animals, and he chases the animals out. Here too we're often offered a palatable Jesus. We're told that he is trying, zealously enough, to purify the temple, to clean out the commercial activity that defiles it. I take it that something else is going on. Jesus drove the animals and moneychangers out of an outer

part of the temple complex, an area called the “Court of the Gentles.” It was the one place where non-Jews could come to worship Israel’s God. They were banned, on pain of death, from proceeding farther into the temple. But they were allowed to be here on the periphery. However, when people came to the temple to make their contributions and sacrifices, they often needed to exchange their foreign currency for local coins, and some of the poorest needed to buy animals for their sacrifices. Entrepreneurs had responded to this need, but by setting up their stands here they effectively blocked Gentiles from the one place where they could approach God. This is what triggered Jesus’ anger, not any alleged defilement of the Temple by dirty animals or dirty money. *“Isn’t it written, ‘My house will be a house of prayer for all nations?’ But you have made it a den of thieves!”* Whether or not the people doing business here were crooked, because of their desire to make a buck they’re acting as though God is theirs alone. Rather than being a nation of priests, a light to the Gentiles, they’ve stolen God from them and kept him for themselves.

Now Jesus has moved farther into the temple complex, up onto the nine-foot high terrace and to the other side of a five foot wall. Now he’s in the “Court of the Women,” so called because any Jew was allowed there, even women. Beyond this point, only Jewish men could go. Beyond the area where Jewish men were allowed, only ritually purified priests are permitted. And at the center, the most sacred place, the Holy of Holies where God was present. Walls within walls within walls. The temple is supposed to be a *sacrament*, the visible sign of God’s presence in the world. Now it’s an obstacle. It’s not about making God available to people who need him; it’s about excluding those who do not

deserve to come near God. (I'm writing this on the 12th floor of the Marriott in downtown Des Moines, looking down at our cathedral. It's not the most impressive building, but with its bright red door opening onto a busy city street and its good old "*The Episcopal Church welcomes you*" sign; I'm appreciating the contrast.)

In the outer courtyard, Jesus' target is an Israel that stands between gentiles and the God it wants to be exclusively its own. Here, in the Court of the Women, his target shifts to those who stand between God and the most down and out within Israel.

Watching the scribes going about their religious duties, Jesus warns, "*Watch out for them! They look like they're doing God's work, but they devour widow's houses!*" The scribes were professional interpreters of the Law, and roughly equivalent to lawyers today. They sometimes served as trustees of widows' estates and, because their fees for doing so were taken from the funds they administered, an unsuspecting widow could end up sucked dry by those whose duty it was to protect her. And now one of their victims appears. She has nothing left but two tiny coins, *lepta*—too small even to bear an inscription—which she drops into the temple's coffers. A devoured widow. Consumed. Disappeared.

We read the story assuming that Jesus praises the woman for her generosity, with the implication that, in contrast to the hypocritical scribes and ostentatious rich people parading by, she loves God enough to give everything she has. Maybe so, but I want to slow down to notice that this is not *quite* what Jesus says. He doesn't actually say

anything about her *motives*. I'm hesitant to pounce on the conclusion that what she's doing is such a great thing, if for no other reason than that in real life none of us would believe for a minute it's a good idea. I'm imagining how Karen and I would react if we found out her eighty-something year old mother had just sent her last \$10,000 to some televangelist, or even to Episcopal Relief and Development. No one *really* thinks it's a good idea for widows to give all their money away, even to God. Maybe the woman gives her last money away out of devotion to God. Or maybe she's in such despair she simply tosses it, and her life, away. Or she's been pressured by the temple fundraisers and is grudgingly doing her duty. (I suspect that in some quarters the principal use of this text is to encourage people who have very little to give it to the Church.) Or she's simply flaky and doesn't know what she's doing. It doesn't really matter what moves her to do it.

What we *hear* is something like, "The woman who put in her last two half cents was worthier than those rich people who put in lots of money." What Jesus *says* is that she put in *more*; that her two tiny grubby copper coins are worth more than the bulging bags of silver plopped down by the rich. What she has to give really *is* worth *more* to God than what they put in. Yet, for all practical purposes, what she puts in the collection, and what she has now, is *nothing*. Unlike the long-robed scribes who imagine that they have all kinds of stuff God can put to good use: their expertise in the Law, their moral influence on centers of power, their piety, purity and righteousness, and unlike the rich people who love the idea of their money going to maintain this beautiful edifice, it's all too obvious that she has nothing to give, and that her donation amounts to nothing. But in God's view, and thus in reality, *their* contributions are precisely worthless; their money

and their knowledge of the Law can go to building more walls, to more rigorously excluding the unwanted from God's kingdom, but God is in the business of breaking down the walls: bringing in the lost, the least, and the last. They have nothing to offer for that. They can only get in God's way. In contrast, the destitute widow has just what God wants to work with: hopelessness, helplessness, haplessness...she has *nothing*. She has brought him precisely what he prizes: her utter lack, her need. It's not that proportionately she has given more than them, it's that they have not given God *anything* he wants, while she has given him *everything* he wants. She's dropped her miniscule offering in the hopper and *now* comes to God plenty of nothing, with the empty hands that she needs to receive the gift of God himself.

The easiest thing in the world is to think that God really does care about what we have—or don't have—to offer him, that we have some currency negotiable in the kingdom of heaven, something that can purchase God's favor or attention. We all know that God accepts us totally *unconditionally*, no strings attached, and that *nothing* we do or don't do can make him love us the slightest bit more or less. But that conviction has a half-life of about twelve seconds. Maybe we're most like the scribes and rich contributors Jesus condemns, and least like the poor widow he commends, when we're at our most humble. “*First* I'll work on my arrogance, vanity, self-centeredness, selfishness, self-righteousness, contempt for others, vanity, pettiness, laziness—the list gets uncomfortably long—*then* I can be of some use to God.” Taking it for granted that if I weren't such a normal human mess, I'd have something of value to give him. As if it's our good behavior and not *us*, screwed up as we are, that God so loves. But the good

news—the Gospel truth—is that the God who empties himself as Jesus is so profligate he lets all that wealth, or all that talent, or all that yearning for righteousness or religious purity go to waste, declaring it worthless in the economy of his love. In the only bookkeeping that can save us, the most you can have is *nothing*. As Robert Capon once called it, this is, “the weird Good News of the God incarnate who makes the wreck of our lives his favorite workshop.” (*The Foolishness of Preaching*, 133)

I wonder whether Jesus sees himself in that desperate woman. Where our text says that she has put in *everything she had to live on*, the Greek literally says she has put in her *bios*, her “living,” her *life*. At this point in Mark’s narrative, it is plain as day where Jesus’ confrontation with the temple and the religious and political powers it represents is headed. He knows that, like her, he will be a victim of the rich and powerful confident they are doing God’s work. Like her, he faces the loss of those he loves in rejection, betrayal, and abandonment. She has been reduced to nothing in the world’s balances, cast aside as worthless, a zero in the calculations of those who think they have what God wants. The same fate awaits Jesus. He knows that one pays with his life to be a failed messiah; he knows that he will be nailed to a cross, ridiculed, cursed, and killed. Spit out by Israel, handed over to Rome, disposed of, a bloodied, lifeless corpse. Made of no account on our behalf. Gone. Made nothing.

Yet, Christ is risen. From that absolute negation of all our attempts to make things right, to be like God knowing good and evil, the God who resurrected Jesus brings our

appalling salvation. Out of the nothingness of that death and that grave comes the crucified God with fullness of life for all.

Christ is risen indeed...but sometimes we'd much prefer to keep that scandal of divine powerlessness safely in the faded past. We'd prefer it to stay God's impotence and not ours. Like those who walled out the Gentiles and the women, devoured the widows, and killed Jesus, we know all about wanting to share God's righteousness and God's power, to be pure and strong, to make things right, to change the world, not to be nothing but to amount to something. We know the temptation to balance our accounts, to get into the black with God. We want to be vindicated, not accepted willy-nilly without regard for our assets. And we wish God would snap his cosmic fingers and make things right for the world, for us personally. What's the use of omnipotence if you don't use it? But none of this is the way God is. He calls us, not to triumph and vindication, but to the way of the cross. The God who was in Christ calls us to take on his weakness, his loss, his death. In Jesus he showed us who he is, as remote as that might be from our idea of a proper God, and now he asks us to be like him, no matter how implausible a way of life that might seem to us. In a church in Corte Madera, near San Francisco, there's an ancient wooden crucifix. Anne Lamott describes it as, "a tall splintering wooden Christ with his arms blown off in some war, under which someone has written, 'Jesus has no arms but ours to do his work and to show his love'" (*Operating Instructions*, 161). Even the resurrected Christ, Lord of all, Savior of the world, remains the God who makes himself helpless, of no account in this world, putting himself into *our* hands, trusting us, for better or for worse, to be his presence in the world. *Amen.*

