

Sermon Notes for 11/8/15 (Pentecost 23, Third-Last Sunday)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Mark 12:38-44

Theme: SHOW VS. SUBSTANCE IN GIVING AND LIVING

Hymn: RW 233 (As Saints of Old)

The Point: God desires substance, not show, in our giving and in our living, and in Christ we have power to live humbly and with a servant heart.

Introduction: Substance, not show, is what God is after in our giving and in our living. This comes through in a number of ways in today's Scriptures. There was not much show in the lives of the widows whom we encounter there. But there was a good deal of substance, substance that flowed from hearts of faith, hearts willing to believe God's promises, even when those promises seemed impossible.

God provides for our needs, sometimes from the most unusual of sources. Think about the experience of Elijah recorded in today's Old Testament lesson. He lived as a prophet in Israel, and at his prophesying the rain was withheld from the land, which as a result went through a severe famine. For a while Elijah lived by a brook and was fed by ravens, who brought him bread and meat morning and evening. Then the brook also dried up, and he was desperate. God told him to go to Zarephath, a town in Sidon, outside the borders of Israel. "I have commanded a widow there to feed you," was God's promise. I wonder what was in Elijah's mind when he heard that word from the Lord. Widows were not typically sources of help for anyone. If anything, widows were usually on the short end of the stick, since they could not be in the workforce and without a man's support they were normally dependent on the charity of family, friends, or the larger community for their livelihood. But Elijah went anyway, trusting the word of the Lord.

At first glance, this widow seemed no different from the other desperate widows of her day. She lived in poverty and on the brink of bare existence. When Elijah encountered her, she indicated that she had enough meal to bake a little loaf for herself and her son – then she fully expected they would starve to death. No means of support were evident for her. But Elijah brought her a sustaining promise from the Lord God of Israel in these words: "The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth." She believed the word of God's prophet, and it happened just that way. She and her son and Elijah had plenty to eat throughout the time of famine, and she housed the prophet in her own home through those challenging months as well.

In today's Gospel lesson, widows figure prominently. Jesus warned the disciples about the scribes, who were all show and who were without compassion for those in need. These scribes, with their picayunish use of statistics and figures, were able to find clever ways to "devour widows' houses." Widows and orphans were among some of the most vulnerable and exposed classes of people in Jewish society, financially, personally and socially. Quite often they would be at a disadvantage when it came to such legal entanglements as housing issues and the like.

Jesus was aware of some of these scribes using their social and political experience to take advantage of widows, even to the point of robbing certain widows of their homes, over some legal technicality. Of course, there was also the religious piece of such disputes, and the scribes were able to cover their shenanigans with religiosity, "long prayers," as Jesus puts it. As one commentator (A. Cole) has put it, "The widow and orphan should above all have been the objects of their compassion and prayer, and instead, they rob them. It is just because they pray that their condemnation will be the more terrible, more than that of a rogue who robs outright without pretense of prayer or religion." This hypocrisy riled Jesus totally! He pronounced condemnation against such hypocrites.

The Queen Mary was the largest ship to cross the oceans when it was launched in 1936. Through four decades and a World War she served until she was retired, anchored as a floating hotel and museum in Long Beach, California. Perhaps you have seen her there (as we have). During the conversion, her three massive smokestacks were taken off to be scraped down and repainted. But on the dock they crumbled. Nothing was left of the ¾” steel plate from which the stacks had been formed. All that remained were more than thirty coats of paint that had been applied over the years. The steel had rusted away. When Jesus called the Pharisees “whitewashed tombs,” He meant they had no substance, only an exterior appearance. (Robert Wenz) Our Lord calls us to live with substance in our lives, not just show. And He alone provides the strength, courage and direction for us to live substantially in our living and our giving.

As Jesus and the disciples sit on the premises, a poor widow is seen in the temple courts. What a contrast between the “religious” scribes and the humble but righteous widow. No show with her – but substance galore! The scribes and wealthy folk come with their offerings held high, in sacks that jangle with their fullness. They want to be seen by men. They want to be honored in the eyes of others. What a contrast with the widow. She comes, no doubt with head hung low, hand gripping the two little coins (together we hear that these coins might have been a quarter hour of work by the typical working man).

We don’t know how she came by these coins. Her offering was not remarkable by any human measure – but then Jesus is not confined to our human measuring sticks. He knew her heart, He knew her life, He knew her poverty, and He knew her richness. And this was His observation: “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.” She had no more to give. All of it, her entire substance for living, was thrown into the treasury box.

Jesus commended this impoverished widow because she put in all she had, her whole livelihood. Quite often the poor have much to teach us about living and giving with substance. Joseph, son of Jacob, remained faithful to his Lord even through times of slavery, false accusation and imprisonment. When it seemed that he had nothing to offer, God’s gift of interpreting dreams the Pharaoh thought was worth the position of ruling the land next to himself. The widow of Zarephath gives us a beautiful picture of someone who holds to the promise of God even when she seems to have no earthly reason to do so. Mary, Jesus’ mother, spoke (and even sang) of her “humble state.” Jesus’ apostles were not learned men, but they were called and became, by Christ’s blessing, agents of His peace to many thousands of people.

I know I have learned a lot from poor people. I will never forget the time we spent in El Paso and just across the border in Juarez with some mission trips. On one of those trips, we were invited to the home of one of the church members. We walked over the mostly-dirt floors of his home to the back yard, where the host had prepared a feast for us that was amazing. The fish soup tickled our palates, cooked as it was over an open fire in a huge pot that had no doubt served many other large gatherings. We learned from our friends living in poverty that giving and generosity have no boundaries of rich or poor.

But none of those examples could hold a candle to what Jesus Himself lived out. Living as a wandering rabbi, He had no place of His own on earth to call home. He obeyed fully, giving Himself totally into the obedience that the Father called for from Him. He spoke plainly and clearly in every situation, even in this Gospel lesson, when He had to rebuke the hypocrisy and lack of compassion of His countrymen. He had to tell Peter to catch a fish with a coin in its mouth so the disciples could pay their taxes. And when it came time to suffer, He gave it all, every ounce of strength, every handful of commitment, every breath, to the very end when He took His last breath. His life was a life of no show, but a life rich in substance, in the substance of trusting the Father’s promises, of reaching out to touch the untouchable, of serving even those who hated and mistreated and betrayed Him. “Having loved His own who were in the world,” John tells us, “He loved them to the end.”

St. Paul spoke of Jesus' self-giving from His poverty in this way: "For you know the generous act [grace] of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9) Just as the widow, out of her poverty, gave everything she had to live on, so Jesus, out of His poverty, gave everything that He had. And that was enough for the salvation of every man, woman and child on this planet. Because of His impoverishment, you have become rich. Because He poured out His blood as an offering for sin, you can walk freely in praise and thanksgiving because your sin no longer condemns you. Because He was the willing sufferer, you can be sure that you never suffer alone. Because He has made you part of the body of Christ, you can live lives of substance, not of show.

According to a story in the *Chaplain* magazine, Charles Spurgeon and his wife would sell, but refused to give away, the eggs their chickens laid. Even close relatives were told, "You may have them if you pay for them." As a result some people labeled the Spurgeons as greedy and grasping. Charles and his wife accepted the criticisms without defending themselves. Only after Mrs. Spurgeon died was the full story revealed. The Spurgeons used all the profits from the sale of eggs to support two elderly widows in their acquaintance. Because the Spurgeons were unwilling to let their left hand know what the right hand was doing, they endured the attacks in silence. They lived lives that were far more interested in substance than in show.

As an illustration of the sort of life to which our humble suffering Servant-Lord calls us, listen to these words of Martin Luther: "I have tried to keep things in my hands and lost them all, but what I have given into God's hands I still possess." The widow in the temple found the truth of that statement. She was commended by Jesus when so many others were thoroughly condemned for their hypocrisy. What she gave away in the name of the Lord, she kept for eternity. She had a grip on kingdom truths. As did the widow of Zarephath, she lived by faith, not by some shrunken wishful thinking. She trusted the Lord to provide her needs in the future as He had done through past years as well. And those who live with that spirit of faith will never be disappointed.

W.A. Criswell tells of an ambitious young man who told his pastor he'd promised God a tithe of his income. They prayed for God to bless his career. At that time he was making \$40.00 per week and tithing \$4.00. In a few years his income increased and he was tithing \$500.00 per week. He called on the pastor to see if he could be released from his tithing promise, since it was too costly now. The pastor replied, "I don't see how you can be released from your promise, but we can ask God to reduce your income to \$40.00 a week again, and then you'd have no problem tithing the \$4.00." (W. A. Criswell, *A Guidebook for Pastors*, p. 156) Our Lord does not desire us to live for show, but He does call us to live lives that throb with compassion, lives that ring out His mercy, lives that point others to His grace.

Conclusion: God desires substance, not show, in our giving and in our living, and in Christ alone do we have power to live humbly and with a servant heart. There is no other source for this kind of substantial living and giving than in the enduring mercy of our Savior. He has given Himself for us, emptied Himself totally upon the altar of sacrifice so that we might know life and hope. Be prepared this day to empty yourself for those around you, even for those who do not yet know our Lord Jesus, so that in your giving they might be led to know the One for whom you serve and for whom you live each day! To the honor and glory of Jesus' name, AMEN!