

The Widow's Might

Ruth 4:13-17; Mark 12:41-44

November 8, 2009

By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

Two stories. The first is not in the Bible. It comes from the Russian novelist Dostoevsky. It concerns a peasant woman, and a very wicked woman she was. She died and did not leave behind a single good deed. According to the story, the devils caught this wicked peasant woman and plunged her into the lake of fire described in the book of Revelation.

Her guardian angel tried to remember just one good deed about which he could tell God. Then he remembered something. "She once pulled up an onion in her garden," the angel told God, "and gave it to a beggar woman."

God answered, "You take that onion then, hold it out to her in the lake, and let her take hold and be pulled out. If you can pull her out of the lake, let her come to Paradise, but if the onion breaks, then the woman must stay where she is."

The angel ran to the woman and held out the onion to her, saying, "Come, catch hold and I'll pull you out."

The peasant woman quickly took hold, and the angel began to pull her out of the lake of fire. Suddenly the other sinners in the lake saw what was happening. They began catching hold of her so that they too might be pulled out. But the woman began kicking the other sinners, saying, "I'm to be pulled out, not you. It's my onion, not yours."

And as soon as she said those words—"It's my onion, not yours!"—the onion broke, and the woman and all those holding to her fell back into the lake of fire. The story ends with the guardian angel weeping.

The second story does come from the Bible, from the Gospel of Mark. It too concerns a peasant woman, "a poor widow," Mark calls her. She and many others were in the temple offering their gifts to the temple treasury. Jesus watched as some placed large sums of money into the treasury. When the poor widow's turn came, she placed only two small copper coins in the

treasury. They were called *lepta*, the smallest coin in circulation. Some of you may remember that the King James Version calls them the *widow's mite*.

While most saw only another peasant woman offering an insignificant gift to the treasury, Jesus saw far more. He saw in her gift an important lesson in discipleship, something that captured the essence of what it means to be his follower. So he summoned his disciples, and he explained to them the significance of what the poor widow had just done. “This poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury,” Jesus said. “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.”

The two stories contrast the human response to possessions. One woman condemned herself and others to the lake of fire because she refused to share an onion, an insignificant possession that yet had the power to save. The other woman became a lesson in discipleship in the Kingdom of God because of her utter dependence upon the care of God. Her gift was small, just a widow's mite. Surely some priest rolled his eyes that day. In everyone's estimation, it was an insignificant gift—except for Jesus. Jesus knew that she was giving more than all the others because her gift issued out of genuine sacrifice and pure faith. Therein, we see the lesson of the *widow's might*.

That's what I want to talk about this morning, the might, the strength, of this poor widow's faith.

The Power of Possessions

This widow's might, her strength of faith, seems to issue from her understanding of the power of possessions. She seems to have understood that our possessions have the power to possess us, as the wicked peasant woman learned. Richard Foster, the Quaker professor of theology, calls this the dark side of money (*Money, Sex, and Power*, p. 20). Possessions have the power to lure us into believing that they can provide more meaning and security than they really can. “You must have me,” they say to us, “or you will be utterly destitute. What would you do then? You cannot live without me.” Foster says that they have the power to shape the way we think and feel about ourselves and others. “Without me, you're a nothing,” they say. “You have nothing and you are nothing.”

Then he says this: “Behind money are invisible spiritual powers, powers that are seductive and deceptive, powers that demand an all-embracing devotion” (p. 29).

Jesus thought so too. That is why Jesus regularly warned his followers of this deceptive power of possessions. Remember the Sermon on the Mount. “No one can serve two masters,” Jesus taught, “for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and *mammon*.” He used the Aramaic word for “wealth,” *mammon*. Jesus was saying that we can serve God or we can serve mammon. Either has the power to claim our devotion. But we can’t serve both.

Let’s be honest about this. Many of us struggle here. We want to be fully devoted to God, to trust completely, and yet we believe that it is responsible to fund our 401(k) too. We would like to get in line at the temple and drop everything in the plate, but we know that our children and we would be eating dinner at the rescue mission tonight and tomorrow and the next day. That’s certainly not responsible. So the million-dollar question, so to speak, is this: what is the proper balance? How can we trust God fully and be fully responsible? Perhaps it is this. We must understand and resist the possessive power of possessions. They have a dark side that can hurt us. Central to the message of Jesus is the teaching that we do not live be bread alone, not on Wall Street, Main Street, or your and my street.

Somewhere along the way, the poor widow in Mark 12 had come to understand that truth. That is why Jesus held her up as a model. She made her choice that day. She would serve God and not mammon. That was the source of that widow’s might.

The Purity of Faith

Jesus saw something else in that poor widow’s gift that was of great importance, something he wanted his disciples to understand. The widow’s might, her strength of faith, also issued out of the purity of her faith. Jesus saw integrity in her faith, a purity of heart that he wanted to be sure the disciples understood.

I believe Mark positioned this text in his gospel carefully, so that its context communicates something. First, its position here contrasts the widow's faith with that of the scribes who were also at the temple that day. Jesus had just warned people of their hypocrisy, of how they were more concerned with appearance and impression than they were with heartfelt spirituality. The scribes surely would have turned up their noses at her tiny gift. It was just too small to matter. But Jesus saw it differently. Yes, her gift was small in comparison to some, but it was given out of a heart that was fully yielded to God, a life utterly dependent upon God, trusting ultimately that God could and would care for her. In the estimation of Jesus, that purity of faith made her gift larger than any of the others.

The positioning of this text here, though, has another significance. Mark has placed it here to set the stage for the gift Jesus himself was about to give. In Mark's gospel this story ends Jesus' public ministry. After this, Jesus begins his way to the cross. So his public ministry ends with the lesson of this poor widow, who, out of her poverty and without reservation, gave everything to God—just as Jesus was about to do. Surely the placement of this text in Mark's gospel suggests that her gift to the temple treasury foreshadows the gift Jesus is about to make—his own life, his all. His gift too was given out of a heart that was fully yielded to God, a life utterly dependent upon God, trusting ultimately that God could and would care for him.

That is the ultimate lesson of this text. As frightening and rare as that is in our highly sophisticated economic culture, that dependency upon God is the linchpin of the Kingdom of God. Indeed, that is the ultimate lesson of Christian stewardship. It's not about funding the church budget, paying the utility bills and all the rest. It is about not allowing our possessions to possess us, not becoming slaves to stuff. It is about giving from a pure heart and trusting in the goodness and care of God. If we assume that stewardship sermons are only about money, a twenty-minute commercial for pledging the budget, then we have missed the deeper spiritual meaning of stewardship. You see, these two stories have been playing throughout history. Those who cling to their onion, saying, "It's mine, not yours!"—they have always been the poorest of all inwardly. And those who give and trust in the care of God—they have always been the richest inwardly. That is the lesson of the widow's might.

Closing Prayer

O God, we continue to be amazed at how You expose our heart, calling for purity. Whether our gifts are large or small, may they all be offered from a pure heart. Amen.