

The Grace of Giving

Psalm 127; Mark 12:38-44

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I find it interesting how many of the women in the Bible are unnamed. And yet they are often heroines—unnamed heroines. Do you remember the story of Jephthah's daughter in the Old Testament? It's tragic, one of the saddest stories in the Bible. A man named Jephthah went to fight an enemy, the Ammonites. Before he left for battle, he made a desperate vow. If God would give him victory, he promised to offer a sacrifice to God. He promised to sacrifice the first person to come out of his door to greet him after his victorious return. How foolish! It was his little daughter. She danced out the door with timbrels, the story says, so eager to welcome her daddy home from battle. But a vow was a vow. And Jephthah fulfilled his vow. We're never told her name. She is simply "the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite."

There's also the Samaritan woman at the well. We're never told her name either. After her encounter with Jesus at Jacob's well, she rushed back to her village to tell her people about this amazing man she had met. John says, "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony." Some claim she was the first woman preacher, and we never know her name.

Don't forget those unnamed women who followed Jesus to the cross. His male apostles abandoned him. Matthew says the women followed Jesus from Galilee and "had provided for him." All unnamed. And the woman who bathed Jesus feet with her tears and then dried them with her hair. What a beautiful act of devotion! She is called "a woman in the city, who was a sinner." Jesus told her, "Your sins are forgiven." We're never told her name.

There are many others. According to some counts, there are over 100 instances of unnamed women in the Bible. I think my favorite is the woman in our text for today. She is called simply "a poor widow," and

she is presented as a heroine of faith. She had a rare quality, what we could call *the grace of giving*.

It had been a difficult day for Jesus. He had a confrontation with the Pharisees. Then a confrontation with the Sadducees. Then several with the scribes. Our text picks up in the temple with Jesus teaching the people. He warned the people about the hypocrisy of their religious leaders. They liked to wear long robes to the marketplace. They expected the people there to greet them with fancy titles. They clamored for the best seats in the synagogue and for places of honor at social occasions. For show, they offered long, wordy, meaningless prayers. All of this was to give the appearance of piety. It was more important to them to appear to be pious than to actually be pious. They were hypocrites. Behind their pious facade, they were devouring widows' houses, Jesus said. They were fleecing the vulnerable.

T. S. Eliot has Thomas Beckett speak these wise words: "The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason." (*Murder in the Cathedral*)

Mark says that Jesus, possibly wearied by all the confrontations and teaching, sat down in the temple. He could see the people putting their money into the trumpet shaped coffers. Some people gave large amounts and made quite a show of it. Sometimes they would have some blow a trumpet. When all the heads turned to see what the commotion was, they would then drop their offering into the coffer.

Then Jesus saw the unnamed woman. "A poor widow," she is called. She put two small copper coins into the coffer. They were the smallest unit of money in that time and place. She had only two. A miniscule amount. But it was all she had. Jesus watched as she placed both copper coins in the offering.

Let me pause here for a moment. This story is a bit troubling for me. At this point in the story, I want Jesus to rush over to her and say, "Wait a moment, dear woman. Take those two copper coins out. And take a little extra because you need it. That is what it is given for." But he didn't do that. He let her give her last two coins to the institution. I

wouldn't do that. I will tell you not to give your last two coins to our church. Don't do it. But Jesus did.

Nobody in this story noticed her gift. She was one of the little people. The Pharisees didn't notice. Neither did the Sadducees. Nor any of the scribes. Not even the disciples. Nobody noticed the little people and their little gifts. Except Jesus. Not only did Jesus notice, he called his disciples over to make sure they noticed. Jesus held up a poor widow as a model for giving. He said that she put more into the offering than all the others, including those who gave large amounts. Hers was a greater gift because she gave everything she had.

I'm going to take a liberty here that I don't normally take. Because this text troubles me. This is not in the text, but I wonder if Jesus knew of someone who could help this poor widow. Did Jesus know of someone who could take her in and help her get back on her feet? He allowed her to demonstrate her faith, knowing that he had a plan for her care. He allowed her to give her last two copper coins to show his disciples, and you and me, the grace of giving.

It is possible to do the right deed for the right reason. That's the message here. Jesus wanted his disciples to see an example of doing the right deed for the right reason. They sure didn't see that in their religious leaders, who were parading around the marketplace, clamoring for the best seats...and devouring widows' houses. I wonder if this poor widow was one of their victims.

I want to point out one other thing that is happening in this story. It casts an ominous shadow. This poor widow's gift foreshadows the gift Jesus is about to make. His life. Everything. Like the poor, unnamed widow, Jesus held back nothing.

There is a grace to giving, isn't there? When you do the right deed for the right reason, it is an act of grace. Whether it is a gift to the church, a neighbor in need, a cause you believe in, there is a grace to giving, when it is done for the right reason.

Ann Landers once printed this letter from a girl. I assume this is a true story. I certainly hope so. The girl said in the letter that her uncle

was the tightest, stingiest man she had ever known. All of his life, she said, on payday he took money from his paycheck and put it under his mattress. He let no one touch it. He let no one enjoy it.

The girl explained that her uncle became sick and was dying. She said that he called to his wife and made a request. "I want you to promise me one thing," the dying man said.

His wife asked, "Well, what is it, dear?"

He said, "I want you to promise me that when I die you'll take all my money from under the mattress and put it in my casket so that I can take it all with me."

She agreed.

The girl went on to explained that her uncle grew weaker and weaker and finally died. His wife kept her promise—sort of. She took all the money from under his mattress and deposited it in the bank. Then she wrote him a check for the full amount and put it in his casket. He could cash it any time he wanted!

There is indeed a grace to giving. Doing the right deed for the right reason. We see a model in an unnamed woman, who had this rare quality. She is now a heroine of our faith. Let us all learn from her example.

Closing Prayer

Lord, teach us how to give, as this unnamed woman gave, as you gave. Amen.