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"A Kingdom of Small Things"

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The Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 12:38-44

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17; Psalm 127; Hebrews 9:24-28

The woman was one of the "invisible" people we never seem to notice. She was a cipher who wandered about in life and no one paid her any mind. They paid no attention to what she did or where she went or what she wore because no one saw her. But that's not altogether true because Jesus noticed her. And Jesus pointed her out to his disciples. And because of that both Mark and Luke pulled her out from the fringes of anonymity so that some two thousand years later we're noticing her yet.

Jesus and his band of followers sat around in the Temple watching the coming and going of the bands of worshipers and saw the obvious contrast between the haughty and the humble being played out before their eyes. Sitting the near the Temple entrance must have been a socially accepted thing to do in the first century. "People watching," we call it today. Who knows? Maybe that's what they called it then. Watching to see who was there, what was going on, who was with whom, talking about the comings and the goings. It's all a part of worship, don't you know?

Nevertheless that's where they were. The haughty were obvious. The signs of their self-importance were obvious to everyone but themselves. They were pious peacocks parading before God and the people near the entrance to God's Holy Temple.

The Treasury was located in the Court of the Women and gave the temple-goers a chance to make payments for certain kinds of offerings, some for holy seasons of the year, others for freewill offerings that provided funds for various causes. In the temple of Jerusalem, there were 13 horn-shaped brass containers designed for this purpose, each designated for certain causes.¹ Can you imagine the racket that was created by dropping a fistful of coins into something that looked like a tuba?

Imagine the scene as the giver brings their coins to toss into the brass offering container with the sound those coins would make as they jangled on the inside of the brass container. A modest gift would be a modest sound, but every now and then one of the big givers would dump a load of coins – making a sound so big it's like a winning slot machine at the casino that lights up and makes all kinds of racket.

But this story is not really about how much she gave (a penny or two) or even that she gave everything she had (yes, you heard it right, she gave everything she

¹ *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987

had). Jesus marvels at how she showed by this action that she lived by faith to get by. This story is not about a poor widow, because in Jesus' time there were no other kinds of widows to be found.

This is a morality play in which Jesus contrasts the hypocrisy of the scribes and the Pharisees over against the religious victimization of the poor widow. In fact, this is a small scene inside a larger story Jesus tells throughout the second half of Mark's gospel of how Jesus thought the Temple, the magnificent house of God, was a whitewashed tomb where dead things are stored. It's a harsh judgment and the religious leaders conspired by discussing how to get rid of Jesus before he spoiled their self-serving form of religion. Getting rid of Jesus was their solution to the problem that was theirs in the way they lived their faith.

Friends, what we give to God's kingdom is between God and the giver. This is not a lesson in accounting, imagining a financial bottom line focused on amounts, as it is a spiritual register of our souls. We understand this as we recognize money is no more than a symbol we offer to God to demonstrate our love of God. In that line of thinking, what you give and what you withhold are true measuring sticks of your soul's condition. We've occasionally used the line, "Give until it feels good" as a measuring stick of how you partner with God in giving to the needs of the world. Your gift may be large or small, but if given as an act of devotion to God, it is enough.

We recognize that one can give their gift, or one can withhold that gift out of some dubious point the giver is trying to make. [In that sense, we should dispense using the word "giver."] The one who has a gift and does not give it to God is taking a vainglorious stand that is both self-serving and arrogant. Know this: The miserly are captives of their own vanity and self-importance. Jesus is plain-spoken in claiming the miserly and the vain are the ones laid in the white-washed tomb.

Jesus puts a new emphasis on worship and faith using both the hypocrisy of the religious leaders and the faithfulness of this simple unseen woman to make his point. So he points out that in the action of this simple, powerless woman, a gift is given upon which the whole kingdom turns.

I love what Father Robert Farrar Capon emphasizes when he says the only conditions by which one receives faith is by being small. We think in opposite terms by thinking we need to be big for God ... big faith ... big actions ... a big reputation or big skills. Maybe we can give big gifts and God will love us, we imagine. But that's not what is required. We are to be small for God. The work of God in salvation is both hard and easy and the hardest part of it is how easy it is.² Capon has said that the conditions by which we are saved are all diminutive conditions. We must recognize that we are little, least, last and ultimately lost. It's our hypocrisies that hold us back and keep us in conflict with God.

² Robert Capon, *The Parables of Grace*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988, 110

There's always more work than any one person can do. There are too many mouths to feed and too many souls that need tending. There are too many folks who are lonely and need a comforting friendship. There are too many injustices that need to be addressed in the name of Christ. And there's always room in the church for someone else to find their place of service. There's room for these to serve in these many ways. But there's room for all of us too for we are the church; we are the people of God called into God's service. You don't have to be big for this work; ironically, you have to be small.

Like the unseen widow, we stand at the place of offering and wonder whether we have enough faith to let it all go for the sake of the Kingdom.

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