

**Proper 27 B    November 18, 2018**

**A Little Girl's Gift**

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She answered the call to give, like many before her, and she never once thought her contribution would be considered less or refused because of things like her gender or her age, because she believed she was part of the church. She also happened to be a little girl, no more than 4 or 5 years old. And when the parish priest's wife had put out a call for parishioners to donate ornaments for the parish Christmas tree, the little girl heard the call to respond. So she went thoughtfully through some of her favorite ornaments and looked at the many glistening options at the stores and found two beauties. They were made of some thin shiny silver material, they were fragile and as any 5-year-old can tell you that means they are valuable, and you must be careful when handling them. They were in the shape of balls, with white bands painted on them, and green shiny bands outlined by some material that stood out and sparkled like crystal snowflakes falling on a perfect winter day. When the little girl asked her mother if she could give those ornaments to the church for the tree that would be part of the Christmas celebrations, her mother said yes.

On the day the ornaments were to be given, the tree was up, a real balsam tree that smelled of the out of doors. And the priest's wife was standing next to it, almost regally, as one by one, the ladies of the parish presented her with lovely ornaments. The little girl did not notice that every ornament presented to the priest's wife was pure white and handmade. Some were crocheted, some were needlepoint, some were sewn. None really sparkled. They were in shapes like doves, angels and stars.

When it was the little girl's turn to present her ornaments, I am sure the priest's wife and the other ladies noticed her simple act of generosity as she shared with them something that gave her pure delight. And I am sure they noticed her desire to share that delight with everyone who came to church that Christmas. But while the priest's wife thanked the little girl and admired the ornaments and made a big show of saying how they were happy to include them, as she said one thing, she hung the ornaments in the back of the tree, where they couldn't be seen and the contrast to the other ornaments would not be noticed.

At the time, the little girl didn't understand the contradiction. Her five-year-old feelings were not hurt, although she learned later in life her mother's feelings hurt plenty for her. You see, the little girl had missed that the priest's wife had asked for specific ornaments; they had to be hand made and white and in symbols representing

the season of Christmas. And the little girl's ornaments were not hand made, and while they had white in them, they were not pure white. So we might think the priest's wife did a kind thing by including the ornaments, even though they were the exact opposite of what she asked for, by hanging them in the back. She may have been trying to protect the little girl. A little girl who had just answered a call to give.

But something must not have sat right with the priest's wife. Because a day or so later, the little girl was at home playing happily in her room. She did not notice the sound of the telephone ringing because the telephone was a grown-up thing. So the little girl was surprised when her mother came into her room and told her she had a telephone call. Now, these were the days before cordless phones, so the little girl had to walk to nearest phone in the house, wondering who in the world could have called her. When she picked up the receiver and said hello, she heard the voice of the priest's wife.

The priest's wife told the little girl she had been thinking about the ornaments she had given, and how beautifully she had given them. The priest's wife did some research on the color and shape of the ornaments and discovered that in the church the color green represented life and growth, especially eternal life, which is why Christmas trees are evergreen trees, and the orb or ball is a symbol of the reign of Jesus of Christ. In other words, the priest's wife had learned that the ornaments the little girl had given represented the meaning of not only Jesus' birth, but his life and death and resurrection, which is the point of the Mystery of the Incarnation. The priest's wife wanted the little girl to know because of what she had learned, she had moved the ornaments from the back to the front of the tree because they were the most profound of all the ornaments given. And when the little girl went to the Christmas Eve service, she did indeed see those ornaments shining in the candlelight. The ornaments collected that Advent were used in that parish for many years after that, including the ones the little girl gave. As the little girl grew up, the ornaments lost their shine a bit, and the other handmade ones aged. Eventually they were all disposed of, and I don't suppose anyone remembered where they came from. But they all knew of the little girl, for she had grown up in that parish, and that parish raised her up to answer other calls: the call to teach Sunday school, serve on vestry, altar guild, Christian Education director, and eventually, God's call to the priesthood.

This little girl's memory might seem a sweet though seasonally inappropriate story for this Sunday, but to me had a lot in common with the widow who gave her all in the story at the end of today's Gospel reading.

Many people are familiar with the story of this unnamed woman who gave her gift to the temple treasury, and while we never knew the woman's name, her gift has its own name: it is known as the "widow's mite", a term that comes up every now and again in literature or conversation as a small but mighty act. Scholars and commentators are in disagreement about the meaning of this event that is recorded in both Mark and Luke's Gospels. Some scholars say this woman is a noble hero because she gave everything to the temple, one we all should pay attention to and follow her example, especially at stewardship time. Others say she is a pitiful victim of a vicious system, one that would happily devour her and her household for the money to purchase some more fancy robes or vestments for the scribes at the temple who liked to look good. These folks say the woman was guilted into giving what she should not have given by a wicked and corrupt system and she is an example of the plight of the poor and should make us who are happy and comfortable feel shame.

The problem I have with these interpretations is that they view the woman who gave two small coins of little value through the lens of what is important only to the secular world: the world of gender inequality, the world of wealth inequality. And through such a lens she is indeed a being very unlikely to be noticed or cared for. A hopeless figure we might judge as careless with her resources. But that does not appear to be the lens through which Jesus saw the woman. Because Jesus did not instruct his disciples to chase after the woman and give her some of their money. Jesus did not try to fix her poverty nor her widowhood. Jesus did not look at her through the lens of inequality at all. He didn't treat her like a little child who brought an inappropriate offering out of their own innocent generosity. Instead Jesus highlighted her gift above all the others given to the treasury that day because of what he saw.

While some say he was praising her generosity, and others say he was being sarcastic, I believe it was something altogether different. I believe, when Jesus saw the woman give her gift with quiet generosity, he saw something of himself in her and her action. Jesus saw the Kingdom of God, the very love of God in an action probably no one else even noticed.

You see, at this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus was in the last days of his life. He was close to his arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection. He was very near to the point where he was going to give his all, all he had, his whole life, not only to a broken and unjust system, but a broken and unjust humanity, humanity that had turned from loving God and loving each other. So when Jesus saw a woman give her all to system that probably didn't really care for her, might not have acknowledged her, Jesus might have seen himself. For he was about to give himself to a world where many if not

most people didn't acknowledge him for who he really is, and yet, despite humanity's failure to know him, believe him, receive him, he gave his all, and through his death and resurrection we can all see God's love is more real and more powerful than all the money and all the power and all the people in the world. So now we can live that love of God in all that we do, and say and yes, even in what and how we give, to each other and the systems of this world. Because that is one way we can make God's love known to the world.

It can be easy to get distracted by shows of extravagance, and it is painfully easy to be disgusted by the inequalities that continue to hurt individuals and communities and institutions and feed the anger and hate and fear that keeps focusing on the brokenness of the world. But all that stuff does not mean there is no hope, no presence of God in the midst of it all. There are those moments when people do embrace and embody the love of God whenever they answer God's call. Maybe it is a call to receive the love of God. Maybe it is a call to give: to give of self-sacrificing love for the other, which can be as simple and sweet as a little girl giving shiny ornaments, or to give time, or money, or presence. Or maybe it is the call to view the gifts and people who given them through the lens of God's Love instead of the lens of inequality. Which means instead of judging the gifts and giver, it means being vulnerable and open and willing to see when the gift or the giver invites us to go deeper into God's love, like the priest's wife who gained not just knowledge, but insight once she truly accepted the unexpected wisdom given to her by a little girl who was just answering God's call. When we see the world through the eyes of God's abundant love – no matter how old we are, or how rich or poor we are, and whatever our gender is – that is when we are most likely to recognize God is indeed with us.