

“The Widow’s Mite” – Rev. Jennifer Adams

November 8, 2009 – Proper 27B

This time of year in two out of the three years in the lectionary cycle we get the story of the widow’s mite. What would stewardship season be without it after all? You know how the story goes: Jesus had just finished teaching his disciples to “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! . . . They are the ones,” he told them “who devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.” And then as Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, many rich people came up and deposited large sums of money. And a poor widow came up and dropped in two coins which were worth about a penny. And at that point, Jesus said to his disciples, “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.” And that was that. And in the gospel of Mark, this story is the last in Jesus’ series of teachings about how the last shall be first and the least will be great and the great will be servants and the most unlikely people of all will end up revealing something of the Christ.

Now there’s an easy financial stewardship sermon in here, right? And my guess is that you’ve heard it before am I right? That sermon about how tithing (giving 10% of one’s income to the church) is actually a minimum standard and how this woman in the gospel is the real model for us all, having given 100% of what she had, holding nothing back. Familiar. Now just for the record, I’m not against that sermon, in fact I’m extremely for increased giving and challenging ourselves to new levels of financial giving (and in case you haven’t heard we are asking for increases this year. We need increases this year in order to keep up with the growing and serving we’re about.) So, while I wouldn’t argue against or get in the way of that approach, that’s not where I’m headed with the sermon today. (And I do have some questions about any institution that would ask for a widow’s only resources. But I think that might be another sermon altogether.)

This morning I want us to focus not in a limited way on the financial in this story but in a bigger way on the giving in this story and specifically where that giving came from. The widow gave from the place in her life that had little. “She gave out of her poverty,” Jesus said. So this was not an off the top “in gratitude for my abundance” sort of gift; nor was it an “I have obviously been blessed with a lot and

have much to give” sort of gift. This was another kind of giving. It was a giving out of a place of near emptiness and that’s what I want us to hold up. This morning we are commissioning Stephens Ministers, people in our congregation who give care for those who need spiritual companionship, usually after the other has experienced a major loss or is walking through some sort of major life transition. Stephens Ministers fit that part of our new mission statement that says “we care for one another, the community and God’s world.” And while we are rich in this kind of caring here at Grace, hoping in fact to be a place where that kind of caring is overflowing in abundant sorts of ways – the irony is that the place that such compassion comes from is often a place in ourselves that is poor. Here’s what I mean.

Henri Nouwen said it best, “Compassion means to come close to the one who suffers. But we can come close to another person only when we are willing to become vulnerable ourselves. A compassionate person says: “I am your brother; I am your sister; I am human, fragile, and mortal, just like you. I am not scandalized by your tears, nor afraid of your pain. I too have wept. I too have [hurt.] We can be with the other [in need] only when the other ceases to be “other” and becomes like us.” We all have places in ourselves that know what it’s like to have given it all, or to have lost it all, or to be running so close to empty that it feels like we only have two coins left to give. And it’s our offerings from those place in ourselves that allow for solidarity with those who suffer whether that be from loneliness or lack of shelter or food, or lack of friendship, or lack of direction or recent loss.

And as Jesus told the disciples that kind of giving, the giving out of our poor places makes a difference, a big one. To give from the places in ourselves that have known emptiness brings a different sort of holiness to our giving. That kind of giving has the potential not only to help another human being, to touch another human being but it can also heal us even as we give of ourselves. And I think that that’s a miracle.

Now I think financial giving can work like that too. It’s just that we tend to put percentages on finances or talk in terms of “giving out of our abundance” with that kind of giving. And sometimes that’s what we do. And the percentages are good because they move us into growth that is not only about numbers but about spiritual growth as well. But the gospel this morning and Stephens Ministers and others in this congregation remind us that stewardship, our caring for and our giving of what has given us, comes in many shapes and sizes, in ways that make quantity and quality get all mixed up and turned on their heads so that suddenly or

maybe “grace-fully” “the little you have to give” is more than you ever imagined it could be.

So as you consider your pledge this season, be sure to consider your giving in all the ways you have to give. Consider the abundant pieces of your life and the empty places too. Spend time with your gifted places and your wounded places too. Acknowledge your places that overflow with a sense of God places and your “I’m still working on it” places. Remember your “I have been blessed places” but also your “I will always hurt here places.” And know that like the widow, 100% is not too much to offer. We need the kind of givings that comes from every piece of who we are. Like the widow may we be given the strength to let go of the coins we carry, those that are gratuities for our abundances and those that truly are all that we have to live on.

Amen.