

“Two Coins”
(Mark 12:38-44)

10/14/21
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The Gospel Reading

The Gospel reading this morning is about a widow, a woman living on the edge, who’s experience of poverty was common in the ancient world and is shared, by many today. It is a story about trust and devotion, but also about betrayal.

She has come to the temple with two coins. They are all she has. Quietly she puts both coins into the offering box. And when Jesus notices this, he is moved to comment, that she has done what none of the wealthy donors have done.

It is true that they have put much larger sums of money into the coffers, but they have only given a safe portion, a portion that will not significantly effect their own standard of living. She, on the other hand, has held back nothing.

The Choice

One of the important details in the story is the number of coins the widow possesses. Since the story is designed to emphasize her poverty, you might think that it would be more effective to

suggest that she had only one coin. But the story tells us that she had two.

I think that this detail is very important because, having two coins means that she had the option of making the same choice the more wealthy donors made. She could have both given and held back something for herself. She could either keep both, keep one and give one away, or give both away. And this connects her with us today, because whenever we are confronted with an opportunity to give of ourselves, we too have more than one coin and so we have the same options.

Simply put, I think that when we think of our money, we always think of it as being in two parts. We think about how much to hold back and how much to let go of. And this applies also to all our possessions and all of our energy.

Conserving our Resources

This seems to be a common sense way to think about what we possess. What kind of runner would spend all his remaining energy at any point in a race other than at the end of it? Not a successful one. A smart runner will measure each hill and valley

and make a calculation in two parts; how much energy should I save and how much should I burn?. Without making this calculation the runner will surely fizzle out well before the finish line.

The seductiveness of this view.

But I do think there is a problem hidden in these calculations; a hidden seduction. Out of fear of expending too much, too soon, it is so easy to hold back more than is necessary and thereby lose the race. Holding back is so seductive because it's a lot more comfortable to run at a more relaxed pace. So any excuse to relax a little is very seductive.

I think the same seductive quality exists in our relationship with our money and possessions. In other words, as we consider our possessions in two parts, we are tempted to increase the portion we withhold in order to make things easier for ourselves. The part we expend starts to shrink and the part we hold onto starts to grow until the two are out of proportion.

From a moral perspective, we become more and more like a kid who looks at his candy bar and rationalizes why he ought to keep

more and more of it to himself and share less and less of it with his friend.

Rationalizing over the Candy Bar

So, whether we are talking about a kid with a candy bar, an adult with an income, or the willingness to help out in general, there are many convincing arguments we can make to justify withholding more and more of our time, energy and gifts.

One argument is that what we give away won't be spent properly by the folks we give to. Another is that the problems in today's world are so big that the little we contribute won't make a difference. Another is that we live in a harsh and unforgiving world. So you can never have a big enough financial nest egg to protect yourself.

It's hard to argue with these justifications. But, I think it is also a slippery slope. Because the more we feel we need to hold back, the further we remove ourselves from the kind of giving that can make a difference for others and for ourselves. Because, just as putting energy into running a race builds endurance and muscle tone, giving when it hurts a little, builds strength of character and leads to hidden spiritual rewards.

Half Heartedness

A divided way of looking at life that is overly concerned with “holding onto one coin” can lead, in my opinion, to a kind of grudging “half-heartedness” in the way we relate to the needs and demands in the world around us.

When a shopkeeper is half-hearted about attending to customers, chatting away with a coworker while the customers wait in line, it shows a lack of consideration and creates a bad experience for the shoppers. Whereas, the fully attentive person at the register makes things run smoothly and sends everyone home feeling good about the day.

Or when parents lack interest in the needs of their children, their half-heartedness leads to problems. I think a lot of kids who end up on drugs or lose themselves down media rabbit holes, get lost because their parents are only half present.

In fact, I sometimes think we are a society that is mostly half present. When you visit with a bunch of young people today, you realize that they are only half paying attention to what is going on in the here and now, while the other half is paying attention to

something going on in cyber-space. Their eyes are glued to their cell phones even as you are speaking to them. And all of this technological distraction and multi-tasking, impoverishes the quality of what is happening in the here and now.

Half-heartedness is also easy to spot in those churches where the minister and the people are only partially engaged in what they are doing, where attendance is minimal, hymns are sung half-heartedly and those with much to give, give little. And much as we all want to experience life in all its fullness, the truth is that when what we put in is given half-heartedly, what we receive in return participates in the same half-heartedness. As Jesus has pointed out “the measure we give, is the measure which will be returned to us” (Luke 6).

The Usual Interpretation.

But Jesus takes our attention away from the half-hearted giving to which we are all prone and focuses it on the widow with the two coins. He points out that, in her poverty she gave both coins, all she had, to the temple treasury. He is drawing our attention to her wholehearted devotion; that it is she and not the big donors who is the model of faith most worthy of our attention.

And likewise, living a life of faith involves committing our whole selves, not just on Sunday morning, but in all that we do. It involves, for example, putting down the newspaper we are absorbed in and giving our full attention to our children, when they need it. And for the young, it involves putting the cell phone down in order to be fully present during group activities.

(This is one of those places where I believe that scientific studies and our scripture are in agreement. It is not possible to multitask and be focused at the same time. When we are doing more than one thing at a time, everything we are doing suffers in quality.).

We need to be able to give our full attention and bring our whole selves to the relationships that make up our daily lives. In other words, when it comes to matters of the heart and to our relationships with God and with each other, we cannot be like those who hold back one coin.

Jesus himself knew when to go off to pray or to take a breather in his ministry. So he was not like the foolish runner who blows it all on one hill. But he knew when to ease up and when to pour it on. But when he was surrounded by people shouted out to him from

the crowd, he was all there, fully present with what was going on around him. He was “all in” and his full attention and spiritual power were present when it was needed.

Faith in Spite of Exploitation

One of the important things to recognize is that the point of our Gospel reading is not to romanticize the poor or glorify poverty. The woman who gave the two coins will possibly go without a meal that night and there is nothing glorious about an empty stomach.

And some of the commentaries on this story alert us to the fact that this is not just a story about an exemplary woman. It is also a story about her exploitation. That, the widow came and gave all she had, out of faith, and as far as we can tell, her money was not all well spent. It may in part have gone to support the very scribes who Jesus describes as walking about in long robes and “devouring widow’s houses.”

So, while the widow’s gift to the temple demonstrates her powerful act of faith, Jesus is also drawing our attention to the fact that the temple system is exploiting her faithfulness.

Examples

When I think of our world today, I see little difference between the widow in the story and the situation of many workers in our economy, who come faithfully to work and give of their time and energy to benefit the company, while at the same time being denied things like paid family leave and being paid wages below the poverty line, while the people at the top are living high off their labor.

Obviously there are many fair and decent employers and it would be wrong to paint them all with one brush. But along with Jesus, I think we should note with admiration those people who come to the altar of the workplace, believing and behaving in accordance with the values of loyalty, dependability and service. They give themselves wholly to their work, even though they know they are being exploited by a system that is impoverishing them in order to fill the already overflowing coffers of people at the top.

But God is watching and sees who the pure in heart really are.

It may or may not be that the widow with the two coins is aware that she is being exploited by the temple system. But if she does realize it, then her dedication seems all the more remarkable. It says something special about her strength of character; that even if nobody else, including the religious establishment itself, is going to be a fully committed servant of God and act in good faith, she will! It is both a deeply troubling and an inspiring moment that Jesus calls us to witness; but also one that encapsulates so much about the reality in which we live.

Conclusion

I think that this morning's reading asks us to consider several questions. One is in what ways do we live divided lives?" Another is "How can we be more fully present in our devotion to God and to the needs of others, not only through our material giving, but in every way?" And finally, how can we live with "integrity", in other words, not as divided selves, even in a system that is betraying us? How do we live without letting our power to love be watered down by a part of ourselves that is consumed by resentment or anger over feeling betrayed? These are serious questions that Jesus sets before us and how we choose to face them can point us toward or away from the Kingdom of God.

. Jesus is also drawing attention to the fact that some of the people we might least expect to see exhibiting strength of character in society may in fact turn out to be our best examples, if we pay close enough attention to what is happening outside the limelight.

Like another widow, the widow of Zarapheth, who feeds Elijah in our Old Testament reading, the widow in the Gospel story is willing to share everything she has in the service of God, even at great risk to her own livelihood. She is willing to trust that what is needed will somehow be provided.

Both stories are examples of the courage that is often found in people living at the edge. It is a courage that I don't think is not typically found among those who live in comfort.

While we are afraid of what might happen if our resources run out, people who have already experienced living on the edge of poverty are perhaps less afraid of it, because they have survived it. This makes them more able to take risks and also more aware of God's power to provide.