

"Nothing from Nothing Equals Something"

I Kings 17:8-16; Mark 12:38-44

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

November 16, 2014 – 23rd Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

I have a picture of some folks on their wedding day. Perhaps it would seem no more than a typical couple who were happy on a very special occasion, except that they are part of my history. It is my grandparents and the date is 1916. If they hadn't found each other, then surely the unique person that I am would not have come to be.

Each of you, likewise, has a long ancestry for which you are indebted as well. Only the pairings that precede you could have produced you. We don't usually think much about that, but it's true. You owe a great deal to these people, most of whom you don't even know their names.

Maybe that's something we're reminded about on Consecration Sunday each year: all the people who laid the foundation of this church. We're young enough as a congregation that several of you early members at Highlands are still an active part of our life. Speaking for all of us who have come along later, we're thankful for what you have given us. Without you, we wouldn't be here in this sanctuary today. And without us, our children would not have the heritage that we worked hard to give them. One generation truly provides for another.

That old picture of my grandparents brings back lots of memories for me. My grandfather died in 1956, but I still recall him fondly. My grandmother lived on as a widow for almost thirty years. I knew her better because we had more time to be together.

Fred and Inez were very much in love. She smiles in that faded picture I have, anticipating all the good times that lay ahead. She probably would have been shocked to hear on that day that she would live the last third of her life alone. She would have wed anyway, but likely would have been tragically sad to know of her fate. Life kindly does not reveal to us what lays ahead.

"Widow" is a word that comes from the Sanskrit and means "empty." And that's a pretty descriptive word for what I understand it is to lose a spouse. Life does not end, it is not without value or times of joy, but it is never the same again. Sometimes we are fortunate to meet someone else, perhaps unexpectedly, and some of those empty places are filled again but never exactly in the same way.

As a group widows are among the poorest economically. Many live below the poverty line. Society has structured itself in such a way that older women are often quite disadvantaged. We've made progress in regard to parity between the sexes, but we still have a ways to go to achieve an even playing field. We need to do our part today to help ensure that those who suffer the loss of a husband should not also suffer the financial burden that often goes along with it. Both attitudes and laws need to be changed.

This is not a new problem. As far back as biblical days, when life was even more male dominated than today, a widowed woman had it hard. Back then they could inherit nothing;

instead they were part of the inheritance allocated to the eldest son. Like the widow of Zarephath in our scripture, every widow could only hope that the oil and flour would not run out. Widows were continually imposed on and badly treated for the most part.

Despite the ancient inequities it was Judaism, and then Christianity, that advocated for change. Warnings against the maltreatment of widows are found as far back as the book of Exodus and continue in prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. Jesus, in our passage from Mark, derides the scribes who act devoutly but whose religion is more show than substance. He accuses them of taking advantage of widows and robbing them of their homes, even as they say their prayers aloud in public. This is not right, he says, and it is not pleasing to God.

Widows were not considered worthy of much attention. They had little social standing, limited rights, and few resources. They were not looked up to nor thought of as models. Yet, in both texts today, widows are cited intentionally as examples. Those who were considered nothing, and had nothing, are here shown as being somebodies in the eyes of Elijah and Jesus. They are lifted up as worthy of being called a child of God.

From the scripture: "He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "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."

How could she have given more than all the rest? Why she only put in two leptons, just fractional cents, the smallest coin. How could that compare with the silver and gold of others? The rich made a special show of noisily dropping their large shiny coins one at a time into the temple collection boxes. The widow quietly laid her laid down her small coins and left. The rich gave hundreds of times more than the destitute woman. Surely, there would be no doubt upon whom would fall God favor, but then Jesus operated from a different standard. He would like this story I'm about to relate.

In the 1930's there was a widow who lived alone in the mountains of Tennessee. During those difficult years government agents were sent out to visit the impoverished farmers of that region to make small loans and grants for seed, stock, and subsistence.

One agent came to the cabin of this particular woman. He found that she was barely eking out a living on two acres of land which she tilled with only the simplest of tools. He asked her the question he posed to all the people he visited, "If the government should allot you a small sum of money, what would you do with it?"

Her house was really no more than a shack. It had a dirt floor and its windows were covered with paper to keep out the drafts. The rain came in through breaks in the roof. There was no running water, no electricity, no telephone. It was undoubtedly among the most primitive places he had encountered in all his contacts.

He repeated the question, "If the government should allot you some money, what would you do with it?" The old widow turned to the man and said with total honesty, "Why I think I would give it to the poor."

The widow from Zarephath, the widow at the temple, the widow from Tennessee were nobodies and they had nothing. Yet from that they gave something which far out valued what the world would tell us are the greater gifts. They had little, but they gave or were ready to give, almost all they possessed. They dug down deep and found hardly anything, but what they had they shared. They gave out of God's generosity to them, meager as it may have seemed to others.

The problem with what the rich scribes gave is that it's given as surplus over what they need. The virtue of the gift of the poor widow is that it is given unreservedly out of her poverty. Perhaps the women in these two scriptures shame all of us. They show us a richness of spirit which stands the test of time.

When we give freely of our time, our energy, our money to serve the one who gave himself for all of us, then we practice true generosity. If God loves the cheerful giver, then what greater joy is there than knowing our resources are being used for Christ's work?

The Lord knows our needs and responsibilities, and understands what we may have to keep out of necessity; but God also knows what isn't essential and what we part with grudgingly. Here we're challenged to imitate the widows and not the scribes. You see, it's not the amount of the gift that's important, but it's the heart of the giver. That's where generosity is measured.