

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
November 8, 2015
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Giving and Living with a Whole Heart

Every year around this time I used to look forward to a visit from my grandparents. This was always a day of abundance when food, laughter and lively conversations filled our family table. Occasionally, my grandfather would catch my eye and wink as I waited patiently for our yearly ritual. My grandfather was a penny collector and each time we came together, I would bring all the pennies I had saved throughout the year and we would pour through them like hidden treasure.

He would pull out his magnifying glass and inspect each penny for the date and mint and tell stories about the year printed on the coin. As a youngster, I would squeal with excitement when he would hold his breath or gasp when a particularly interesting offering had been made. He often gave me quarters in exchange for my pennies- not a bad financial deal. What I cherished the most was the anticipation of offering up what I had, to someone I love. When I would experience his delight, it was as if my heart was overflowing. I wonder if the widow in our gospel story experienced this abundance when she offered her pennies to God with love and faith.

This gospel reading is a familiar story to us and is often told in the context of faithful giving and stewardship. After all, we are in that time of year and the widow can be seen as a wonderful example. What is important is not the measure of how much you give but the attitude of heart. A closer look suggests that this is not so much a story about stewardship, as it is about what it means to be a faithful disciple. She gave her whole life because her life depended on it. Jesus confirmed over and over again that following him meant giving and living with our whole heart.

Most remarkable in this narrative is what came before the giving; a decision. It was a courageous decision to let go when all of the circumstances screamed, "Hold on!" She had every reason to cling to the meager sum and yet she let go. What could possibly motivate this woman to give her all, withholding nothing from God? What could cause this utter self- abandonment? Perhaps she had given up and was ready to die, or she laid down her life in trust that God would provide. We do not know what happened to the widow.

I pray that in her faithful offering, she found abundance of heart.

We must also read this gospel as a cautionary tale. As his last teaching before his journey to the cross, Jesus confronted the scribes for their prideful show of piety and pointed to the ways in which they thrived at the cost of those more vulnerable. Widows were especially powerless in a patriarchal society. Jewish law prevented them from receiving an inheritance. When the man of the house perished, the inheritance went to the eldest son. The scribes often acted as guardians, giving financial and spiritual counsel, sometimes with predatory intentions. Jesus condemned a system that would demand so much of someone with so little.

Amidst the loud clattering of the rich man's gift Jesus noticed the humble placement of two small coins made by the poor widow. The Greek word "ballo" describing the widow "putting in" her offering is also translated to cast, to break loose, to lay down. As the widow laid down her life and broke loose of her fears her heart was freed to depend on God. With life hanging by a thread, how would she survive if she gave everything she had?

Her decision of faith and trust was her offering and this was of great value to God. Jesus knew her gift would make no financial difference to the temple. In fact soon after, he predicts the temple's destruction. But he saw in the widow something familiar, something that he wanted the disciples to see. She was facing the end much like Jesus. She would give her all in faith and foreshadowed God's ultimate offering in Jesus Christ.

Most of us here today, hearing the widow's story, would think don't give both the coins! Save yourself! Giving one and saving the other to live on would be fair and reasonable. It seems foolish to give it all. Does God really expect us to offer up everything? At the end of the month, while we may feel like the widow, we're most likely in the same tax bracket as the scribes. Even when we have arrived, don't we just set the bar higher? An attitude of scarcity leaves us clinging to what we believe will save us. Giving and living with our whole heart begins with a decision to let go. Theologian Frederick Buechner wrote, "We find by losing. We hold fast by letting go. We become something new by ceasing to be something old."

Jesus laid down his life as an offering so that our hearts could be filled with God's grace. What could be more abundant? Consider what you might offer, to be freed to live with your whole heart. For each of us the answer will be different. A decision to let go of fear or control may be an offering of trust. Releasing perfectionism or the need to be right may inspire humility. Giving away ambition opens our hearts to others and ushers in God's abundance. God will do miracles with whatever we offer.

What came before the widow's mite was a decision of faith that God would provide and care for her in abundance. As we lay down what binds us and present our lives to God with our whole heart, we are filled to overflowing. God delights when we offer our pennies and our hearts because we are freed to trust that God is our abundance. Amen.