

“The Widow's Mite”

November 8, 2015 – Rev Nancy Wakely

I started thinking last week about the Gospel reading for today and realized it was that familiar story about the widow's mite. It's a story that I've heard since childhood and it's probably familiar to many of you. On the surface, it appears to be a story about giving to the church until it hurts. Then I read the words of Fred Craddock, one of the most powerful preachers of our time. He said that when you read a scripture you should not just look at the surface meaning. That preaching should be like “boiling down the water and then preaching about the stain that's left on the bottom of the cup”.

This story in Mark was probably based on someone's remembrances of the things that Jesus said during the last few days of his life. He and his disciples were at the temple in Jerusalem. It was a magnificent temple that was being built by Herod to appease the Jewish people and that was being run by scribes who made a living off donations and the backs of the poor. And when you boil this reading down, that is the stain left in the bottom of the cup.

No one notices this woman. She's an invisible person who lives on the lowest rung of the ladder. She's a widow, a person without a way to support herself and to make things worse, she's a woman—a person of little value in a patriarchal society.

Amidst all the fanfare of the upper classes giving of their abundance, here is this one woman, stepping up with great dignity and giving to God that which gives her life—the only two coins she has—and no one notices. No one else notices, but Jesus does. In that moment, he sees and he points it out to his disciples—and he speaks up for her and he lights a candle to illuminate not only her total love and trust in God but her invisibility to others.

Jesus denounced the scribes who made their living by taking advantage of others. They appeared to love God but they did not love the stranger. He denounced them for not loving the poor, the alien, the poorly dressed, and those who were different. He denounced the scribes for perpetuating the institution that they fed off of at the expense of others. An institution that had lost its way and cared more about its preservation than for negligible people like this widow. Jesus understood that in spite of what the temple was supposed to be, the reality was something else. At that moment, he became the voice for those who have no voices...he lit a candle for his disciples to see by and he shined a beacon on the invisible.

There was no message in the giving of those two coins that even resembled the platitude that God loves a cheerful giver. And Jesus did not make that point either. This widow gave, in her heart, not to an institution but to a God that she loved and that she trusted and because of that love and that trust, she gave up that which would keep her alive. Maybe she even thought there was someone else out there who had less that would benefit from her gift. And in doing so, she gave up her life. She gave not just coins but herself.

Jesus was a just a few days away from doing the same thing himself. He knew that institutions, let alone corrupt institutions, do not represent the heart of God.

We talk about Jesus being the sacrificial lamb and his crucifixion being a blood atonement for our sins. That was language that made sense to an ancient people. But I believe his death was more. He lived by these words, "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself". In this woman, he saw the neighbor God calls us to love. And in his death, that was what he did. This is what is left when you boil down the water, the poetic language, and look quite simply at what is in the bottom of the cup. He gave his life for love of God and neighbor and in doing so, he showed us what love is about.

One writer wondered if the widow's coins were still damp from the sweat on her hands as she reluctantly released them...and faced an uncertain future. We are told that Jesus did not give up his life without some anxiety, "Father, if it is your will, let this cup pass from me". But then, he trusted, and walked to his death. But from his childhood until the final moment that he said, "Father into your hands I commend my spirit" he trusted God, loved God, and never stopped loving his neighbor. It didn't matter if you were an alien, a leper, a tax collector, a prostitute, a person who had made unwise decisions in life, sometimes out of necessity. It didn't matter if you were an outcast or an emperor. Jesus died giving voice to the powerless and trying to open the eyes of the powerful. He asked us and he asked the powerful not to just talk the talk, but to walk the walk and then, He lit a candle and sparked a fire that is still burning over 2,000 years later. We are called as Easter people, as the people of the way, to do no less.

A few years ago I shared the words of a song with you during this same season and would like to share it with you again:

There is a candle in every soul
Some burning brightly, some dark and cold
There is a Spirit who brings a fire
Ignites a candle and makes His home.
Carry your candle, run to the darkness
Seek out the hopeless, confused and torn
Hold out your candle for all to see it,
Take your candle and go light the world.
Frustrated brother, see how he's tried to
Light his own candle in some other way
See now your sister, she's been robbed and lied to
And still holds a candle without a flame.
Carry your candle, run to the darkness
Seek out the lonely, the tired and worn
Hold out your candle for all to see it,
Take your candle and go light your world.
We are a family whose hearts are blazing
So lets raise our candles and light up the sky
Praying to our Father in the name of Jesus
Make us a beacon in darkest times.

**So carry your candle, run to the darkness
Seek out the helpless, deceived and poor
Hold out your candle for all to see it
Take your candle, and go light the world.**

And when you light a candle and look up in praise to God... be sure to look down and all around you. See who Jesus is pointing to. There are invisible and helpless people that are waiting to be seen. Then step out on the path that Jesus illuminated for us and be all that you can be to the those who need us so much.