

November 12, 2006
Ruth 1:22-2:7; Mark 12:38-44
First Parish Church UCC, Brunswick
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Abundant Giving

To begin this morning I need your help. I'll start a familiar phrase and ask you to complete it.

So, if I say, *birds of a feather;*
you say, *flock together.*
Still waters... (run deep)
A penny saved...(is a penny earned.)

It's nice to know the answers, isn't it?
Many of us derive a deep sense of comfort and security from predictable answers. We know what's coming.

However, such predictability can also be profoundly limiting. Some of you, maybe the more impish among us, may have been itching to give other responses. So, now's your chance. For a moment give your mind freedom to explore other responses. Don't follow the old rut. Now, how might you finish the same phrases?

Birds of a feather.. (fight over the same food.)
Still waters... (grow algae)
A penny saved... (ain't much!)

Giving unconventional answers is a whole different experience. They wake us up. We have to pay attention because they 'catch' us. It is this very ability to think outside the box, so to speak, and to consider new possibilities that have provided the biggest leaps in scientific, mathematical, and spiritual understandings.

Jesus' capacity to perceive the Spirit outside the conventional had a powerful impact on those who came in contact with him.

One of our struggles is that Jesus' words have become so familiar to us that what were once very unconventional, even disturbing, images in his day have become domesticated for us. We've heard is so many times we have a hard time sensing the radical nature of his sayings and observations.

Which brings us to today's story from Mark. The setting is the crowded temple. Who would have caught our eye? Those who come to "see and be seen" in their long flowing, richly colored and textured, robes, who dropped in a lot of money from their large sacks of coins? Or the poor widow who dropped in two little copper coins?

Who catches our eye when we arrive here on a Sunday morning? Our friends who we are always glad to see and be seen by. Or, the stranger who is sitting alone? Or maybe when we arrive on Sundays, we're so tired from the week we just want to close our eyes to all around us.

That day, Jesus had his eyes wide open. He noticed one of the "unnoticeables" - the poor widow. There are three strikes against this person in her culture. She is female. She is poor. And she is alone.

I heard a reading this week that was a poignant reminder that the experience of many women in the world has not changed much over the millennia. It begins..

We are female human beings poised on the edge of the new millennium. We are the majority of our species, yet we have dwelt in the shadows. We are the invisible, the illiterate, the laborers, the refugees, the poor.

(*Life Prayers*, pg. 159, Robin Morgan)

The text specifically says she was poor. “Poor” and “widow” are two words that pretty much went together in biblical times. Women didn’t own property and were dependent on male relatives. So, poor widows in many respects were culturally ‘invisible.’

In a busy temple the poor widows would tend to blend into the background, like the kitchen help in the cafeteria at school. Our attention is usually drawn to the people we want to see and be seen by. Jesus notices those who are serving and clearing the tables.

Today’s scripture readings are full of “background” widows – the poor widow in the temple, and Ruth and Naomi in the book of Ruth. Apparently, when Ruth and Naomi return to Bethlehem none of the men in the extended family immediately take them in. I wonder if it’s because Ruth is “from away.” By levirate practice the next of kin is supposed to take her as his wife. But he doesn’t.

So Ruth and Naomi are on their own - not exactly a situation of abundant living. However, Ruth, continues to be committed to her pledge of faithfulness to her mother-in-law Naomi. In order that they may eat, Ruth heads out to the fields to glean, which

means picking up what’s left over from the harvest, and she shares it freely with Naomi.

Later in the book of Ruth, Naomi will help Ruth become Boaz’ wife. Both Ruth and Naomi are good stewards of their life together – their life in community.

Have you noticed that “abundant” is an “in” word in recent years. When I put “abundant living” into Amazon’s book search, there were more than 17,000 responses. One of my favorites is *Four Weeks to more Abundant Living* (by Margie Hesson) How ironic! Only four weeks!

As a country, (although we know it’s not true for all people) we have the greatest amount of abundance – abundant food, clothing, education, health care, and entertainment. As a country we are overflowing (that’s the root of the word abundance) with material things. And teenagers today have more disposable income and influence over the family budget than ever before. If you don’t think so, just look at how the advertisers target teenagers. So you young people are already stewards of financial treasures– making decisions about how, when, where, and why money is spent. For all of us, the question is what spiritual factors are influencing our decisions?

Today’s scripture readings imply that for sound, *spiritual*, advice about how to manage our resources and our communal living we would be wise to watch poor widows- at least the poor widows whose stories are told in those passages. These widows don’t give out of their abundance. They don’t have any abundance in the material sense. But they give abundantly of what they have.

We’re so familiar with this story of the widow’s mite that we run the risk of hearing

it as quaint. What a sweet, old lady. We sometimes take the story to mean that the amount we give doesn't matter, it's the intent. However, Jesus is challenging us about the amount. This story is about proportional giving. He noticed the rich people did put in large sums, but proportionately it wasn't much. The poor widow, on the other hand, put in two small copper coins, which was a large portion of what she had.

Jesus is not just praising the woman. He is holding the others to account as well. He's saying here is the very person who is supposed to be helped by the gifts to the treasury. At least one of those donation chests was for the widows and orphans. Here is one of those whose house is so often devoured by some of the rich men, who are putting in many coins. And she is the one giving abundantly.

We still struggle with economic policies and practices that create a chasm between rich and poor. Here is a small example from one of my brothers who works in banking. We were talking one day about banking "fees." He commented on discussions and arguments he had been a part of at the policy setting level in his company. He was concerned because they were advertising "free checking." Yet, they were also very aware that they had high fees for overdrafts (fees that are often higher than a monthly checking fee would be). They knew they would make a lot of money on those fees. Clearly the people who would have to pay these fees are those of a lower economic status, who don't always have enough cash flow to keep the accounts clean. Yet, people with little money are attracted to "free checking." We often find ourselves in tension between good business practices and issues of justice.

Ironically, it is often those who are struggling financially who have a deep instinct about abundant giving. Jonathan Kozol, a researcher who studies the lives of poor children in America, tells of a young boy living in the South Bronx, who was sent to get three pieces of pizza for his family for supper – one for him, one for his mother, and one for his father. That's all they could afford. On the way home, the boy came upon a homeless man who asked for something to eat. The boy gave the man some. When Kozol asked him if his parents were mad at him, the boy replied, "Why would they be mad? God tells us, "Share!"

How is it that this boy and the women in today's lessons have learned to be abundant givers? Maybe knowing the struggles of being poor and/or suffering through the death of a loved one – whether a spouse, a child, a parent, a close friend - strips away illusions of personal security and opens people's eyes to the power of community. Each of the people in these stories is acting for the good of others. They have no illusions of security. They know clearly that no one can make it alone. They know they stand in the need of God's presence and the help of others. Actually, isn't that part of why we are all here today?

So as we welcome new members into our community today, we are reminded that our call to stewardship includes being good stewards of our life together, which, as always, draws on our time, our talents, and our treasure.