

HEARTS OF SUBSTANCE

“She out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”
~ Mark 12:44

It had been a hard winter in Appalachia. The snow piled deeper and deeper, the mercury dropped, rivers froze, people suffered. The Red Cross used helicopters to fly in supplies. One crew, working day after day and long hours noticed a little cabin submerged in the snow. A thin whisper of smoke came from the chimney. The rescue team figured they were surely out of food and other necessities. Putting down the helicopter a mile away to avoid trees, they put on heavy packs with emergency supplies and trudged through heavy, waist deep snow. They reached the cabin exhausted, perspiring and pounded on the door. A thin, gaunt woman opened the door as they gasped: “We’re from the Red Cross.” She was silent for a moment and then said: “It’s been a hard winter, Sonny, we can’t give much of anything this year.”¹

In this post-election week, it’s been a hard proverbial “winter” for many reasons that I will not take time to enumerate this morning. It’s now time, as a dear friend put it this week, to set aside differences and find common ground for the common good. The campaigning is over.

Needless to say, there is a connection in this Red Cross illustration – the woman’s immediate response to give and the gospel story we just heard. It is often described as the widow’s mite – a mite being a small denomination of ancient money, two small copper coins as the text suggests. How striking that it appears in our lectionary today following as one theologian wrote in a post election poem: “the peaceable order of our nation for the chance of choosing – all the manipulative money notwithstanding.”

¹ Adapted from The Messenger, St. Mark’s Episcopal Church, Palo Alto, CA.

In short, the context of this story is Jesus' criticism of the rich and visible believers, the Pharisees – the rich, the powerful, who liked to wear long robes and stand in public places and make much of their piety and their philanthropy and good works. In one sense this is just more of the same: criticizing the establishment – those people for whom doing good works and giving good gifts doesn't cut anywhere into the substance of their being. The rich give out of their surplus, declares Jesus, but the widow gave out of her substance –that is, the essence of who she was. She gave all that she had, and not simply content to describe the transaction, Jesus says that this is the better way: she has given more than all of them; in other words no one is too poor or too constrained to give, and no one may give too much. We may not fully understand the principle behind this, but apparently it is one that Jesus thought highly of. Biblical scholarship tells us that widows in biblical times were among the most vulnerable and marginal members of society. Widows in the Christian narratives were not only vulnerable but poor and Jesus specifically implored the early Christian communities to look after widows and orphans, to visit them and take care of their needs, because they had no safety net but the community. While the Law of Jesus' day obliged all to support the Temple, no Temple policy should generate an expectation that the vulnerable should make themselves more vulnerable, and no widow should be allowed to impoverish herself. The teaching of Jesus in this text reveals this value discrepancy. The functioning of this theology in practice is that God's chronic concern has always been for the poor and the most vulnerable.

The point is – when an example like today – such as the poor widow – is invoked, as Jesus often does in the Christian gospels, he uses again the marginal in society to drive home a particular and essential point. Taking people on the outside edges of society and culture and social and economic security he uses them to illustrate a central understanding to his gospel message: if the poor widow can do much with so little what more can then be expected of we who have so much? This is the point that cannot be evaded or avoided is this lesson about surplus and substance. And unless

you've not been paying attention the last 18 months it has been at the heart of our political and electorate discourse. Whether you agree or disagree with the outcome of our national election, as citizens of the world and this nation, many of us do care about what theologian Walter Bruggemann calls the "public face of God's purpose." In other words, thoughtful and highly integrated people notice the gap between what is preached and what is practiced, which is the substance of the heart of this lesson about Jesus, the widow, and the treasury.

To be sure, I have no doubt that over the course of these many months for some any hope for meaningful change perhaps made us want to abandon politics and our participation in it altogether. But citizenship as many of us understand is a privilege we enjoy and a responsibility that we cannot ignore. We cannot simply abandon the public square and the greater common and civic good. This gospel text today, as well as the book of Ruth from the Hebrew Scriptures that Sairus read for us, are profound examples of much deeper nuances. Redemption in a broken world, the hospitality and kindness of strangers, the faithful presence of God who is stuck with us all, the bond of love that holds across differences, God tenaciously at work through the most unlikely people, and what might be born and possible when we live as our best selves.

In these texts it would be unfortunate to stop at what appears on the surface as scales of gifts or two coins and miss the more elusive point: in what do we place our ultimate trust and the means by which we express that trust – which some of us call faith? The stories of the poor widow and Ruth and Naomi all depict a world of real struggle and scarcity in some way. What I hear through the nuances of these stories and passages is perhaps that God wishes us to understand that it is not about the proportion of gifts or kindness or love but more so our attitude toward life, toward others, toward self, toward God. If we understand that life itself is a gift from God, if we understand that we are meant to express God's self giving life in the world and if we are confident and hopeful that God will sustain us in wealth and in poverty and in everything in between

then might we see life as giving rather than holding? What I glean from the examples today of the poor widow and Ruth and Naomi are those to possessed by hearts of substance who stood in what author Parker Palmer calls the “tragic gap.”²

The election may be over, but it is not just political leaders and systems that constitute our democracy and now must carry on with the great and perilous tasks and fiscal cliffs that lie before them. What is required of me, of us? Now what? Do we go back to business as usual? I haven’t been able to stop thinking about that this week. And while many of us may be quite satisfied on a number of accounts with the outcomes of this national election, there are others that are not. It is no secret that we remain a deeply divided nation and are still faced with the task of latent opportunity. We clearly do not live in a swing state in CA, which can shield us from the ideologies and perspectives of many of our fellow citizens, including our own families and friends.

Parker Palmer, quoted earlier, is also currently the director of the Center for Courage and Renewal and describes its chief concern is that citizens are abandoning the public arena because its so toxic, divisive, and abusive. This inevitably creates a vacuum into which non-democratic powers like big money are eager to rush. Helping each other reoccupy the public realm beyond our civic duty and right to vote – requires ongoing civil conversations between individuals who see things differently. This is an investment in democracy. Just because the election is over certainly does not mean that the public square has evaporated or hibernates for the next four years. So what might having hearts of substance mean in this case? Palmer has given me some serious food for thought on this question. It could mean creating what he refers to as relational containers not with those with whom we agree but perhaps disagree, with the main rule being to turn toward honest, open inquiry and dialogue rooted in simple respect. Tell me something that will help me understand you, your life, your worldview

² The Sun Magazine, *If Only We Would Listen*, Parker J. Palmer on *What We Could Learn About Politics, Faith, and Each Other*, November 2012.

and where your convictions come from. He suggests that maybe, just maybe, the more we learn about other people's stories, the less possible it is for us to dislike them, distrust them or dismiss them. Are there people with views with whom I cannot be in dialogue with? Yes – as Palmer suggests and with whom I agree – those that attempt to justify violence against people of certain races, religions, sexual orientation, gender and so on. Those justifications are terribly destructive and ought not be honored with dialogue but witnessed against with courage and clarity suggests Palmer. But when talking with people whose views we regard as wrong, I need to ask: am I here to win this argument or am I here to create a relationship? If I can create a relational container and hold an ongoing dialogue it's more likely that someone will change. It could be me. It could be you. I do believe that the leap for marriage equality in this election – in the states of Maine, Maryland, Minnesota and Washington, is profound evidence and one example that this is clearly at work, as one example, in the fabric of our civic society.

Standing in the “tragic gap” to which Parker Palmer refers and I alluded to earlier, means the gap between hard realities around us and what we know is possible, not because we wish it were so, but because we have seen it with our own eyes.³ Proximity matters. On this Veteran's Day weekend I'm reminded of Iraq War veteran Tammy Duckworth, elected to Congress by the people of Illinois. She lost both legs when her Black Hawk helicopter went down in Iraq and knows substantively what it means to stand in the tragic gap of war and continues to choose to serve her country over and over again, never giving up on what is possible.

As the first openly gay person elected to the Senate this week, Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin says she did not run to make history. She ran to make a difference.

³ The Sun Magazine, *ibid.*

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Standing in the tragic gap, whether it be contemporary examples like these or the stories of the lives of from our religious narratives in the poor widow, Ruth and Naomi, means that though it may be a gap that may never close, effectiveness becomes secondary to faithfulness. In other words, being true to our own gifts, true to the perception of what the world needs, and true, as Parker Palmer puts it – to those points where our gifts and those needs intersect. It requires us to stand in the gap for the long haul and get past our obsession with results.⁴ It requires us to give great pause to think about the life we have each been given through God's great mercy, about what is most fearful to us, what is most cherished, about what things in this world for which we are most grateful. To possess hearts of substance requires this and more – to think about our fair share of responsibility in the world, in our democracy, in our communities and to consider our giving, our loving, our serving not in proportion to what we have but what we have been given. It is, ultimately, an opportunity for each and every one of us to conduct a spiritual audit so to speak in the quiet, even the tragic and odd moments of our lives, now and in the days to come.

Amen.

⁴ The Sun Magazine, *ibid.*