A.M.D.G. Pentecost 24-B / Remembrance Sunday Text: Mark 12: 38-44

 November 8th, 2015

***Mark 12 ...*** *As Jesus taught, he said, ‘Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.’ 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.’*

For anyone who has been going to church for a number of years – our scripture passage this morning about the ‘widow’s mite’ comes up every 3 years in the lectionary – that 3 year cycle of Bible readings used by many mainline churches. As this reading occurs on both Remembrance Sunday and during our Stewardship Campaign – it was my original intent to focus on the heroic, sacrificial giving of the poor widow. And that would not be inappropriate. ‘The Widow’s mite’ has become a colloquial phrase in Western English-speaking culture that often refers to someone’s meager or small contribution – which has a meaning far more than its size might indicate. But as so often happens in this mysterious, wild and unpredictable task called ‘preaching’ – the bible reading before us this morning took off in a totally new direction as I hosted the story again – and allowed it to speak in new ways to my understanding of the text.

As far as the widow knew – no one noticed her among all the others thronging the Temple that day – as she slipped in two small copper coins in the Temple treasury. But then again – no one ever saw her. She was one of those invisible people who come and go unnoticed – the ones who tend to ‘fly under the radar’.

In the scene the gospel writer Mark describes for us – there were lots of people milling around that day – people who know that other people are watching them and who seem used to it – even pleased – when heads turned and talk stopped for a moment as they made their entrance. When these people came into the room – they announced that Someone – with a capital ‘S’ – has arrived.

Mark tells us that they were the rich and the scribes – Jerusalem’s elite – many of them doctors of the law - whose long years of study made them the official interpreters of God’s word. They were the religious professionals – the clergy of the day – who wore long robes and whose names were listed in the bulletin. These were clearly the people to watch and to notice.

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Only – as our story unfolds – it becomes clear that they were **not** who Jesus had his eyes on in the Temple that day. He seemed far more interested in those who slipped invisibly through the crowd, and hovered on the margins – and in one woman in particular. It’s hard to speculate what it was about her that caught his attention. It was clear that she was a nobody – a woman without means – most probably dressed in shabby clothes, and doing her best to avoid scrutiny. All of which indicated that she was probably a widow – one who lived on the margins of society – with no safety net – so social status to hide behind. When she lost her husband – she not only lost her place and her name – she had become invisible. She was vulnerable in every single way that mattered. Two pennies short of the end. No one saw her anymore and no one cared – except Jesus.

He saw her walk to the Temple treasury to offer her two small coins – and something about the way she did it – the length of time she stood there perhaps - or maybe the way she cradled them in her hand like her last two eggs ... something about the way she offered her ‘widow’s mite’ spoke to Jesus – telling him that perhaps it was the end for her – that there was nothing left for her to hang on to. Her sacrifice so captured him that he called his disciples over to witness it. “Truly I tell you,” he said to them, “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.” The Greek word used here makes it clear – she didn’t just give a little – she gave ‘her whole life’ – everything she had.

Here’s where the conversation took a surprising turn for me as I was preparing for this morning. Here’s where it took on a harder edge than I expected! For - how are we supposed to hear this story? Should we cheer or weep? I had not noticed before in my reading of this passage that Jesus does not praise the widow for what she is doing. He simply calls his disciples to *witness* to what she is doing. He sits them down beside him to compare what she is doing to what everyone else there is doing - to contemplate the disparity between abundance and poverty – between apparent sacrifice and the real thing. We cannot hear what is in his voice as he speaks – whether it is praise or lament.

This is the moment in the story when I’d give anything to hear Jesus’ tone of voice. Is he heartbroken as he tells his disciples to peel their eyes away from the rich folks and look in her direction instead? Is he outraged? Is he resigned? What does it mean to him – mere seconds after he has described the Temple leaders as ‘devourers of widows’ houses’ – to witness just such a widow being devoured? And worse – participating in her own abuse?

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I suspect Jesus had a heavy heart as he watched the widow give everything she had to a morally bankrupt religious institution - to surrender her whole living to those who lived better than she did. I suspect that Jesus is not lifting her up as an example so much as decrying the circumstances that demanded her to make such an offering in the first place!

Through this story, Jesus shows us a God who cares about this nobody – this woman and her sacrifice. I doubt anyone else, including the religious elite parading around the Temple that day and dropping in their token offerings – noticed her. And I doubt the disciples following Jesus would have noticed her either – had he not drawn her presence to their attention and sympathy. In doing so, Jesus reminds us that God sees our struggles, recognizes our challenges, and cares about where we are hard pressed. And even more – he invites us, as he did his disciples – to look around us – and really see each other – the beauty and the pain all around us: those who are discriminated against, those who feel invisible and voiceless, those who have lost hope, those who live with uncertainty and anguish. Those deemed the ‘nobodies’ in our society and in our world. And there are many!

And what does this story call forth from us? That we should stand up for those who are most vulnerable? Yes. That we should stand against laws or customs that exploit the poor? Absolutely! That we should press our governments to enact policies that mirror God’s intention to care always and foremost for ‘the least of these’? No question! And I know some of you will be watching as eagerly as I will be – to see if our new Federal Government will fast-track things like living conditions on our First Nations reserves – many of whom have been on a ‘boil water’ order for decades; like an inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women; like creating affordable social housing and eliminating child poverty. In the midst of a country with rich resources – these and other issues like them have been a blight on the collective ethical conscience of our country – all of us who are Canadian – and certainly those us of who call ourselves followers of the Christ!

In today’s morning paper, Farid Rohani writes: “*The issues (facing our world) are intactable. But they are not ignorable. And it is time that Canada stepped back onto the world stage … We have a capacity by example and advocacy to nurture, protect, and support leaders who are currently struggling to do the right things. We have the resources to educate a new generation of leaders who can return and lead a transformation in the character of their own countries. We cannot impose our will, but we can share our capacity ….”*

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This story invites us to look for where God is already at work – and to join God’s efforts in seeing – really seeing - those in distress, those who are struggling, those whom the world names as ‘nobodies’ - helping to offer comfort and relief, and to work for a more just world. Put simply: God notices – and invites us to open our eyes as well. God cares, and invites us to care too.

Perhaps, in the end – that ***is*** what our stewardship campaign is really all about after all. In God’s eyes we are all a ‘Somebody’ – with a capital ‘S’; God sees us – regardless of our circumstances; and God believes we all have something to contribute – that we can each make a difference – and that our actions, however small, can help bring into being the vision of the world God intends for all creation.

May it be so! Amen.