

Proper 27B New Song

Sort of wish I hadn't agreed to preside at the Eucharist today for Elizabeth – especially after I took a look at the Gospel where Jesus tells us to: “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk about in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!” (Mark 12)

Now, I think Jesus was talking about an attitude of mind and heart more than he was about ecclesiastical haberdashery, but you get the point. In a liturgical church like ours, we have to always keep in mind that “uniforms” like vestments and clerical collars are about designating functions and roles – NOT about spiritual superiority or oppressive hierarchy. But we must always be vigilant to assure that one does not turn into the other!

I **am** glad that I got to wrestle with the second part of this particular Gospel reading though, because I'd like to use it as an example of how Scripture can always be looked at in a variety of ways, and that that's part of why it can be fresh and new in every age and in different contexts. And I'm grateful to a young emerging church pastor named Doug Pagitt for his little book *Flipped* in which he talks about how “flipping” certain passages of Scripture from how we have traditionally understood them can challenge us in new and exciting ways.

In one chapter he takes on our Gospel reading for today. And, I'm going to quote him directly just so you'll know I'm not making this stuff up! Doug writes: “About a year ago, I Flipped a story of the widow who gave all she had. At my church, Solomon's Porch, we use an open discussion group on Tuesdays to put together the sermon for the following Sunday”.

“We are reading this story, and I was telling the group how I had used it at retreats. A man who was visiting had joined us for the evening. When I finished talking, he said, ‘I think you have that story totally wrong.’ As he explained himself, I knew he was right.”

“He suggested that Jesus wasn't using this woman as an exemplar of faith. Instead Jesus was pointing her out as a victim of the temple's requirements. Jesus wasn't

saying, 'Be like this woman.' He was saying, 'Be careful or you **will** be like this woman. The system will leave **you** penniless and broke. It will take all **you** have and leave you with nothing to live on.' It was as if he were saying, 'For the rich, this system works fine. But for those who have given all they have, they end up with nothing.'"

"This guy pointed out the verses that preceded this story. Jesus was in the temple issuing warnings: 'Watch out for the legal experts. They like to walk around in long robes. They want to be greeted with honor in the markets. They long for places of honor in the synagogues and at banquets. They are the ones who cheat widows out of their homes, and to show off they say long prayers.' Then a **widow** came along and proved Jesus' point!" (*Flipped*, by Doug Pagitt, Chapter 6)

And the verses which follow directly **after** this passage strengthen the argument, "As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings?' Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.'" (Mark 13:1-2) Those verses, and the warning about the scribes, form the bookends to the story of the widow who gave to the Temple treasury "all she had to live on." Interesting!

Now, I'm not here this morning to convince you to throw out the traditional interpretation of this passage, the way most of us grew up understanding it. I **am** here to suggest that sometimes "breaking open the Word of God" with a group, or even by regular Bible study yourself, can reveal some surprising things.

I'm here to suggest that interpretation from "below," from the grass roots, from faithful people just like this guy who visited Doug Pagitt's Bible Study can revolutionize our understanding of Scripture! Catholic Christians in the "base communities" of Latin America have been telling us this for decades! These poor people, meeting in small Bible study groups in which they apply the plain reading of Scripture to the oppressive situations in which they live, gave birth to Liberation Theology which applies to so many in our world today.

I've been reading the Bible daily for just under fifty years! Following the lectionary I read several Psalms and a couple of chapters of Scripture each day. I am constantly surprised at how, paying attention to the **context** of the passages, learning something about the historical situation in which they were first written, and applying them to real-life situations we face today can "blow us away" with fresh insight and new interpretations.

Our Jewish sisters and brothers know this **so well** which is why they engage in Torah study and argue endlessly about the meaning of each verse and each word as they seek to apply ancient wisdom to the world in which we live. The Book of Hebrews says, "...the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12-13)

Reading the Bible every day sheds light on the thoughts and intentions of my heart most every morning and evening. So, whether you understand the widow in today's Gospel as exemplar or victim, **do know** that Jesus was no fan of the religious establishment of his day. He was a faithful and practicing Jew, but – like the prophets before him – he spent a lot of his time criticizing the chief priests and the Temple hierarchy.

He knew that God does not live in a temple made with hands and that, while religion is an essential part of life, we must be constantly vigilant that it is not misused to lay heavy burdens on people and manipulate them through threats of hellfire and brimstone or fear of God's judgment. For

"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!"

And just **perhaps...** that's **NOT** what God had in mind...after all!

