

Proper 27, Pentecost XXIII November 8, 2009

There's a subtle and pervasive misuse of scripture that is so common, and so attractive, that it's almost taken for granted. Alas, I do it all the time. It's the trap of moral hunting. That is, a story from the Bible is treated like the shell of a nut—as if the real meat, the moral of the story, is hidden inside. So, the story itself has to be broken down, cracked apart, to find what's really important. Then the story can be discarded, and attention focused totally on the point, or moral, that's been revealed. We can go so quickly from 'what does the story say', to 'what does it mean' that we end up ignoring the story itself.

Now, while this approach is not totally misguided, it can be dangerously incomplete. The brief account of the widow's mite that we just heard is a great case in point.

Since the widow's mite conveniently comes along toward the end of this year's stewardship campaign, the temptation is to take the story, extract some moral from it, and then use the moral to talk about Christian stewardship. And, to be sure, Jesus does make a real point about the widow's gift: She has given more than anyone else, and that's because true giving is measured, not absolutely, by the size of the gift, but proportionally, and relative to what's left. God's arithmetic is different from ours—and God asks different questions.

So, the moral of the story can easily be described as the fact that the value of what we give—its value both to God and to us—has to do primarily with the extent to which the gift is a direct, proportional, expression of our thankfulness for all that we have been given by God. Perfectly solid stuff; well worth preaching about.

But notice how we've left the story behind. The widow has vanished, and her mite becomes our moral. Something very precious has been lost. I want to return to that story—for not only has the scripture not been exhausted by finding a moral; it has barely been touched.

Here's what's happening: Jesus is in the Temple grounds and he's just given a savage attack on the scribes for trusting in themselves, for seeking honor, and for greed disguised as piety. Still filled with the emotional force of these strong words, Jesus sits down. He's facing the Court of the Women, a large enclosed space inside the temple proper. This enclosed courtyard is huge: it's over 80 yards long and 50 yards wide. Also, this is the week of the Passover, (and Wednesday in Holy Week); so the court is filled with pilgrims from all over the known world.

The scene is a blur of colors, a Babel of languages, constant movement, and a *lot* of noise. Scattered about the area are 12 or 13 large wooden chests, each with trumpet shaped opening on top (a little like the old-fashioned record players). Each chest is marked for a different purpose: Temple dues (last year's and this year's); incense; the cost of sacrificial animals; the cost of wood for the Altar; and so on. A large part of the noise in the place is caused by people—many of whom have been saving all year for just this moment—tossing their offering into the various chests. The chests and the offerings are designed to make a solid noise when they meet.

It's the best time of the year for the Temple treasury. Much of the noise is satisfyingly loud as many contribute large amounts. Jesus watches, and listens.

On the edge of all this activity, virtually invisible in the garb of a local peasant, a woman quietly drops in two thin coins. These are the smallest coins in circulation, worth together about 1/4 cent as we count it today. Really, it was nothing. (But it was all she had.) Those two coins, when they hit the chest, made a tiny sound.

And in the midst of all the languages, all the offerings, all the noise in that busy courtyard, it was the sound of these two tiny coins that Jesus heard; and it was this sound Jesus made sure the disciples heard.

It is that sound, above all others, that the Lord still calls us to hear. To understand, and to make our own, the story of the widow's mite is not to find a moral, it's not to discover some hidden meaning. To understand the story of the widow's mite *is to hear that sound*. It's to hear the sound of her whole living tossed into a chest marked "free will offering". It's to hear it as Jesus heard it, two days before the crucifixion. To understand the story of the widow's mite is to hear that sound still as it echoes through the centuries to us—a couple of weeks before Thanksgiving.

I'm haunted by that sound, by that quiet explosion. There's no moral to it. It's just there. Just the little 'ting'. Hear it, listen to it. Listen to it carefully and long; let it work on you. || Listen to some of the questions that sound asks. Was her action prudent? Was it wise? Isn't she a bit of a fanatic? Wouldn't *one* coin have been enough, for heaven's sake? ||

That sound rings with judgment. That sound challenges all of our careful planning; all of our cautious generosity; all of our hedged bets. || In that sound there is faith acted out with a recklessness, an abandon, a completeness, that is both terrifying and compelling; both silly and possessed of a wisdom that shames the world.

I wonder what those Scribes Jesus had just been talking about thought about the sound those two coins made. Maybe they were too busy listening to people call them 'honored sir' to hear. Or, perhaps the louder noises filled their ears. Two thin coins don't make a sound that reaches to the places of honor at feasts, or the best seats at the synagogue. || The disciples couldn't hear it either—not until Jesus showed them that something very important was going on. Like the Scribes, the disciples were totally absorbed by the great gifts, the louder noises.

Remember, there are no hidden instructions in the sound of those coins—there’s only the sound. Jesus didn’t say that everyone, or anyone, or you, should do what the widow in the Temple did. Jesus didn’t say that what she did was reasonable or that it was the best possible use of her money. Jesus simply heard what happened—and made very sure that we hear it, too.

Even so, the questions keep coming. Think about these: Who owned this woman, the widow in the temple? Where was her life invested? | Who owned the Scribes? | Who owns us?

Who in this little story was secure, who was safe, who was worried about losing? Who was a slave, and who was free? || What does the noise these two coins made say to us about living in faith, about risking, about gratitude, and about giving?

There’s no single answer to these questions, there is, really, just the story. There’s just a sound for us to hear—not with guilt, but with awe and confusion. Not to teach us a lesson—but to stretch our hearts, and to allow us to wonder, and to dream.

So I leave you, not with a moral, but with a story; not with any firm conclusions, but with a sound that only Jesus heard. It’s a sound that has something to say about faith, and about stewardship. It’s a sound that says something about the noises we make—and about who hears them. It may well have something different to say to each of us—and that’s just fine. The first step isn’t to understand—the first step is to listen, and to hear.