

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17

Psalm 12

Hebrews 9:24-28

Mark 12:38-44

“Two Ha’pennies”

In England, we have an expression that goes “doesn’t have two ha’pennies to rub together” for someone who is really poor, and I think in the U.S. you have a similar expression. No prizes for guessing that that idiom comes from this gospel reading. Perhaps, this year, for the first year for many of us, we can really relate to have only two ha’pennies to rub together, as we have watched our 401ks dissolve into 101ks, or maybe like me you’ve stopped looking at all! Joking apart, it’s probably a reality for many of us if we offset our liabilities against our assets. Most of us probably don’t have two real pennies to rub together and as a country we certainly feel much poorer than we were.

Coming face to face with these two widows in today’s scriptures may give us a sense of perspective. Being a widow has never been easy, and at the time of Jesus it was among the least desirable positions to be in. A widow without a male to protect her and take care of her was a social outcast. The care of widows and orphans was a key requirement of the Hebrew faith. *The Bible mandates, "You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan" (Ex. 22:21)*, but the reality was far from certain. The best any widow could hope for was Naomi and Ruth’s story; that a male relative, often a brother in law, would take them in as a wife and claim their inheritance. This was important because the continuance of the male name was important. God was merciful it seems, in that Ruth inspired kindness and perhaps love in a kinsman of Naomi’s and that led to security for them both and from that liaison, Ruth became the great grandmother of David, from whom we are told Jesus is descended.

In the case of the widow in Mark’s Gospel, we are brought much more starkly face to face with poverty. The story has her juxtaposed with the widows who are being taken advantage of by the scribes (who should know better). Predators we are told, taking the homes from the helpless. I think we can all see real parallels here and I confess to a shudder of realization that we are not done with this yet. Many trusting souls were taken advantage of by unscrupulous mortgage brokers who plied unbelievable mortgages to the unwary even in our present day. And for those who want retribution, there’s some hope of justice, it seems, if we listen to Jesus’ reaction to the scribes of his time: *“They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”*

Jesus then draws our attention to where he is sitting – across the square it seemed – from where the people are going into the Temple, each depositing their pledge or Temple Tax into the box or plate. Look, he seems to say, beckoning, look at this woman

who has just put two Half pennies into the box: *"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."* Only Christ could have known that.

There is no condemnation of wealth here, presumably all were giving the required tenth or tithe, but the amount is not the measure, rather it is the intention that is being weighed. This widow reaches into her pocket and puts all she has into the treasury and we are called to ponder why?

Underneath The General Seminary there is a homeless shelter deep in the basement where the boiler is. Many of the seminarians served as hosts there, welcoming our guests and preparing coffee, peanut butter sandwiches and snacks for supper and for breakfast. One of the guests I came to know, Morris, had been coming to sleep there for years. Morris' story was an interesting one, and is one that could easily belong to any one of us. He had been a New York City Cab driver. He got sick and then one thing led to another in a spiral of events. He lost his job, his marriage broke up, and he ended up homeless. Over supper, he and I had many conversations about England because, in better days, before he got sick, Morris had gone to England. He loved it – the cabbies' knowledge, the sights, the people – and he loved to share his tales with me. When he knew I was leaving he opened his wallet and pulled out his 5 pound note. He wanted to give it to me as a memento – we were not allowed to receive gifts – but the more I protested the more hurt he became – "hold on," I thought, "who am I to take his dignity away." I said I would take it but only if he let me give him the dollars it was worth. "Ok" he said, "but only if you put them into the collection plate. Because," he said, "this place is home to me, and I am so profoundly grateful to have shared my stories with you, I want to show my gratitude to God, and I have nothing else to give." I did put the \$10.00 into the collection plate, and I still have the five pound note and it serves as a reminder to me, not just of Morris, but of the lesson I learned, which was that when people have nothing, no-one has the right to take their dignity away. Morris gave what he had, a foreign note, in profound thanksgiving for the gifts of God in his life.

This widow could have given just one half-penny, that was, after all, the minimum she could've given. No-one could've blamed her. She could've chosen not to go to the Temple that day and thereby not give anything at all. She could've sat by the gate and begged for alms, putting her two ha'pennies as a starter on her cloak. She could have given up on this God who had let her become so impoverished. But she chose not to, she chose to show her gratitude, her love, her faith, her trust by giving her all and this is not about money!

The point is that for these wealthy givers in this Gospel, although they are giving, they are keeping a tight hold on the second penny in their pocket. They give because they have to, they give what they are required to give and strut about feeling pious because they have. Before we get too self-righteous and pointy, let's look at ourselves for a moment. How often do we do just this, give as little as we can get away with and walk

around feeling good about it? How often do we come to church, half-heartedly either spiritually or emotionally, because we feel we have to? How often do we give half our commitment to the church because we are distracted, or not feeling totally committed right now? Are we reaching into our pocket for one ha'penny and holding on to the other?

This poor woman gave all she had, we don't know why – but she gave it from her heart, not her pocket, because she knew that God would not short-change her.

In this season of thanksgiving for our blessings, I invite you to place those two pennies you were given into your hand. And as you do so –take one and think of the gifts of God in your life – a child, a trip, a person, a relationship, a blessing of some kind (minute of silence) and now with the other penny, consider one way in which you have received a blessing of this church in your life, the presence of Fr Hubbard in a crisis, the nurture of the Eucharist when you needed to feel centered, the joy of baptism and Easter, the beauty and holiness of Christmas – the friendships you have made, the care you have been given, a sense of welcome you have experienced, the joy you experience in giving to others, and offer to others, a gift that this church has given to you. Try to quantify also how many lives beyond your own this church, your church, has touched over the years, directly and indirectly, through soup kitchen, and prom dresses, resettlements and AA groups.

In the times of our scarcity, we don't need to look far or think for very long to find God's abundance in our lives. God never short-changes us. Neither the widow, nor Morris gave out of abundance; they gave all they had to give, because their hearts were brim-filled with gratitude. +

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