***GIFTS OF FAITH AND FAITHLESS GIVING***

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Texts: 1 Kings 17:1-16 and Mark 12:38-44

 In Slippery Rock, PA where I grew up there was a woman in the church by the name of Mabel Blyth, better known to everyone in town as Grandma Blyth. She lived in a blue house on Main Street next to a Slippery Rock College fraternity house; she was the fraternity sweetheart! Her husband, a pilot, had died in World War II; her only daughter lived in Cleveland; but Grandma Blyth’s house was alive with people of all ages coming and going as she hosted brunches and dinners and stuffed animal tea parties for children. As a result, Grandma Blyth was a fount of information on all the goings on of folks in Slippery Rock. So, it was not surprising that she was the first to receive a call from her old friend Gladys Nichols one spring morning.

“Mabel, I have wonderful news,” said Gladys. “While I was in Florida, I met the most wonderful man; we began dating and we’re going to be married.”
“Gladys, that’s wonderful,” said Grandma Blyth. “What’s his name?”

“It’s aaah, it’s aaah, hmm,” said Gladys, “well I can’t remember right now, but he just went to the store for some milk, and when he gets back, I’ll ask him and call you back.”

A few weeks later Gladys and Stanley Sawyer were married and enjoyed several years of wedded bliss together in the twilight of their years.

 There was a time in Elijah’s day, and in Jesus’ day, when widows had few options apart from finding a Stanley Sawyer to provide for them. There weren’t many jobs available to them, most owned no property, there was no social security or 401k plan to draw upon, and unless they had a child who was able to provide for them or a husband’s brother who would marry and take responsibility for them, they were often dependent upon the generosity of others to survive. They were among the most vulnerable in society, and Scripture makes clear again and again that the people of God owe a special duty to care for them, protect them, provide for them, because they could not provide for themselves in a society that valued and offered them so little.

 Today’s texts offer us three stories about widows; what is essential to understand in approaching them is this: these stories are not about the marital status of these women as wives who outlived their husbands. They are about vulnerable women who struggled to survive and were held in low esteem within the societies in which they lived through no fault of their own. For them, life was hard.

 The first story is about Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. As you heard, the Lord had imposed a drought upon the land as Elijah had prophesied to King Ahab. The drought was a direct challenge to Baal, the Canaanite god of storm and rain. The Lord was proving himself greater than the Canaanite god who was no god at all. Those who might be tempted to forsake faith in the LORD to worship Baal, including Ahab himself, were given proof of who held divine power – and it wasn’t Baal! The LORD alone was God over storm and rain; if the LORD chose to withhold the rain, it was so, and there was nothing that Baal or any other false god could do about it. But the LORD was not just God of storm and rain; by feeding Elijah in the desert by the Wadi Cherith, God showed power over all living things as ravens (not the Baltimore football players) brought Elijah his food morning and night. To paraphrase our opening hymn, this was the Lord God Almighty who alone was holy and to whom all God’s works offered praise in earth, sky, and sea.

 But while the drought proved God’s supremacy over Baal, it also inflicted suffering upon the people. As the wadi that satisfied Elijah’s thirst dried up, the Lord sent Elijah to Zarephath, a town on the Phoenician coast outside the land of Israel. Elijah went, trusting that the Lord is God not only in Israel, but also beyond its borders in Zarephath. There another miracle took place – God provided food for Elijah and for the widow and her son from an endless supply of oil and meal that would sustain them through the drought.

 Perhaps Elijah’s trust in God is not surprising; he was after all a prophet of the Lord. But what of the trust of that widow who took the little meal and oil she had, food that she expected to be their last supper, and made for Elijah a cake before feeding herself and her son! She dared to believe what he said his God could do, impossible as it seemed, and because she did, because she trusted the word of the Lord through Elijah, she and her son survived the drought in miraculous fashion. How easy it would have been for her to dismiss this foreign stranger and do as she had planned: prepare the last meal for herself and her son and then die. But instead, she chose to trust the word of Elijah and the God of whom he spoke and in so doing, she and her son were saved. “*Faith is believing in something that common sense tells you should not be*,” writes one author. It was that kind of faith that the widow of Zarephath had!

 Do you have that kind of faith? Do you trust that God will provide for you, that in the words of the 23rd Psalm, “The Lord is your shepherd, and you shall not want”? That is not to say that you should expect a bottomless box of Cheerios that will provide for your breakfast every morning, but God does provide for us through blessings we often take for granted and through the generosity of others who share with us blessings God has given them. Each of us has much for which to be thankful, but we also have something to share by which God may do great things. In Zarephath God did a great thing with a little oil and a little meal for a woman who showed a little faith; God can work in and through what little we have to offer, if we will only dare to believe and then offer it. For, if God can bring about drought in Israel, feed Elijah from the beaks of ravens, and make bottomless a foreign widow’s jug of oil and jar of meal, then God can do great things in our midst too – even though we are a continent and an ocean and thousands of years away. For, there is no place beyond the reach of God, no people who are not loved by God, no thing that is impossible for God. For, our God is Lord of all!

That same God refutes the maxim often attributed to the Bible, but actually coined by Benjamin Franklin, “*God helps them who help themselves.*” God calls each of us to do more than help ourselves. We are called to help others, to serve others, to love others, to share with others from the blessings we receive, be they great or small. And it is that call that is affirmed – negatively and positively – in these other two stories of widows told by Jesus and recorded by Mark.

The first comes in the form of a warning about the scribes. They were learned men, well-respected in the community for their intelligence and religious authority, and they knew it. Their status in the community had come to trump their duties to God. They were wholly lacking in humility, but overflowing with hubris, and did not mind stepping on those below them in order to climb the ladder of success. In condemning them for their actions, Jesus lifts up the poor widows of whom they had taken advantage. It was to them that the scribes owed a greater duty of responsibility, a greater duty of care, and yet they became the victims of the scribes’ greed and thirst for power. These religious hypocrites took advantage of the very women for whom they owed a duty of care.

In the past week alone, I read two reports of people who took advantage of elderly patients to whom they owed a duty of care – one an attorney and the other a caregiver. I read of a young pastor who preyed upon girls in the youth group he led. I read of the CEO of a non-profit who was indicted for using the funds donated to his agency for his own selfish purposes. Jesus’ condemnation of the scribes echoes across the centuries to indict men and women in the 21st century who abuse their power and take advantage of others to whom they owe a duty of care. And before we self-righteously point the finger at them, we had better be sure that we are fulfilling our responsibility to all those to whom we owe a duty of care – the poor, the refugee, the stranger in our midst, the hungry, the homeless – our neighbors! We are blessed with gifts so that we can be the instruments by which God cares for them, and all it takes is a little faith and faithfulness with the gifts we have in order to make a difference in their lives. We may enjoy our successes and comfortable standards of living, but we had better be darn sure that it does not come at the expense of others, or we are no better than those scribes!

What a contrast then is the widow who dropped her two copper coins into the treasury! Jesus said her gift was greater than all the others, because she gave all that she had to give, all that she had to live on – much like the widow of Zarephath. Was hers an act of faith that God would provide for her? Jesus seems to suggest so, but perhaps it is also another indictment of those scribes who would accept her gift without offering to her anything in return, including the duty of care that they owed to her. The rich gave out of abundance, the scribes took out of greed, she gave what little she had out of gratitude and faith.

Whose gifts do yours most resemble? As you reflect on your giving, your tithes and offerings, and today your pledges for 2022, are you like these widows giving what you have out of faith and trusting God to provide? Or are you like the wealthy donors at the treasury, giving out of your excess? Or are you like the scribes, taking far more than you give to those who need it most, those for whom you are responsible to care? God blesses us that we might be a blessing to others. May you be so blessed and such a blessing! Amen