

Sermon at St. Thomas, by Lynn E. Cunningham

November 12, 2006

I Kings 17 17:8-16; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

1. The gospel passage for this morning tells of a poor widow who puts her very last pennies into the Temple treasury. The lesson is positioned in the lectionary to be read during the stewardship season in most parishes in the country. I suppose one way this lesson will be read is an argument that, since this one widow put her contribution into the Temple treasury, so all church members should make their contributions to the church.
2. This reading of the story is pretty flat. But what is going on in this and the other passages?
3. And why do two of the lessons, plus the psalm 146, all stress the suffering of widows or widows and orphans?
4. How can the reader get at what is going on in these lessons?
5. An architect who was doing plans for the renovation of our house back in Washington, D.C. once, was showing Dorothy and me some drawings of what the new exterior walls of the house would look like once the construction was finished. First, he showed us the drawings, the elevations, and then he turned the drawings upside down, and said that he often found that turning a drawing, or a painting upside down let you see whether the proportions were good or not.
6. So, to get at what might be going on in the Gospel passage, let me turn it upside down, so to speak.
7. Instead of telling the story about a poor widow, let me re-tell the story tell around some other kind of person.
8. I suggest we use another category besides widows, a category that is just as familiar to us here in Dubois, the category of the “disappointed hunter”. This is hunting season and I have been hearing one story after another about how this person or that bought his hunting license, spent time out at the rifle range truing in his gun sights, bought some new hunting equipment, then went way up into the high country to find himself a big elk for his winter meat supply, and came back with.... nothing. Let’s call him or her the “disappointed hunter”. Why should the widows get all the sympathy? What about the disappointed hunters, you might well ask?
9. Disappointed hunters can come in many different forms. An old friend who lives over in Jackson told me of one eager hunter a few years ago who sure enough shot his cow elk out deep in the back country, cleaned out the carcass, hauled it back to his truck, drove proudly up to the game warden to have his tag checked, and discovered.... that had just shot himself a genuine, full grown mule. Not a mule deer, but a mule.
10. And just last week also over in Jackson two hunters were proudly field dressing their elk kills. They had elk tags. They were feeling so satisfied. They were proud of their successful hunt. Then the game warden came up to check on their tags and to check out these two elk that they had just shot. They became disappointed hunters when the warden pointed out that they had just killed two moose, and, boy, were they in trouble.
11. The trouble with having so many different kinds of big game around here is that can be

- awful hard to tell them apart. They all have brown fur, after all, and most of them have horns. Except the mules.
12. I wonder if that hunter who shot the grizzly bear up on Togwotee Pass on October 11, last month thought he was bagging a bobcat?
 13. So how do you think these bible stories would sound, if instead talking about the poor widows Jesus had been here in Dubois, and had talked about a disappointed hunter, instead of about a poor widow?
 14. Listen to the story again. Jesus and the disciples were sitting inside the Temple one day, by the treasury, and they spotted a poor, disappointed hunter walking up to make his offering. He is walking slowly and sadly, feeling all the weight of his profound failures in life. His family will be left with furtively buying BEEF and CHICKEN in the supermarket again this year..., instead of feasting on wild game. He holding by its tail the biggest, proudest game animal he could bag, one small, slightly battered... chipmunk. The chipmunk is still wriggling in his hand, since he had not quite succeeded in finishing it off. And there all around the disappointed hunter, walking proudly through the Temple, are dozens and dozens of wealthy widows, all of them clearly successful in their hunting, all of them carrying grand, trophy-size, elk and moose antlers to offer up to the Lord. Indeed, these are sumptuous gifts worthy of being put into the Temple treasury.
 - a. And Jesus remarks, how hard it is for a disappointed hunter to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. No, I'm sorry, that is not what he said. Instead Jesus points out how this poor disappointed hunter is putting all that he has bagged into the temple treasury, after weeks of hunting out in the cold, out in the snow in the mountains, while the comfortable widows of wealthy scribes are simply contributing out of their abundance of game.
 15. The poor disappointed hunter, who has failed miserably in his hunting, nevertheless offers all that he has gotten up to God. He is at the end of his rope, and yet he still opens up his heart to offer all that he has, while the others, the wealthier ones, are sharing only a part of themselves and what they have gained.
 16. The story as it is actually told in the Gospel makes the same point. The poor widow does not tithe. She does not offer up a tenth of her meager savings. She does not carefully husband her resources, and set aside some portion to share with God. She is not careful with her money, even though she has very little. The passage literally says, she has, out of her poverty, put everything she had into the Treasury. And to stress the point, the passage says, "all she had to live on". This may be terrible financial planning, but it is what Jesus in the Gospel is asking for. Everything is given over to God.
 17. This passage echoes strongly the story we heard just a few weeks ago, of the rich young man who came up and asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. And Jesus tells him to give up everything and come and follow him. Remember my sermon last month when I started suggesting that everyone sell your homes and cars, and hunting rifles, and favorite things, and come and follow Jesus? Today's passage contains the same message. Jesus here again points out that the widow has given everything over to God, just as he had asked the rich man to do.
 18. And the passage from Kings has the same message. Elijah, the prophet of God, comes to

a poor widow in Zarephath, and asks her to prepare a small meal for him. She says that she is down to the end of her rope. She has reached very last food that she has in the house, the very food that she and her son were about to eat as their last meal before they lay down to die of starvation. Their very last meal, Elijah asks for.

19. When the woman prepares this last, meager meal for him, Elijah, then, and the Lord God through Elijah, reveals that, because she has been faithful, her jar of meal will never run out, and her jug of oil will never run out. Because she made herself open completely to God's messenger, because she was faithful, she and her young son would not starve.
20. Psalm 146 picks this same message, and affirms that, Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help! Whose hope is in the Lord their God.
21. They are happy because they will be satisfied with good things. The psalmist goes through all forms of human suffering, all the times when people have found themselves at the end of their rope, like the hunter, and affirms that the Lord God will comfort them through all suffering. The psalmist affirms that there will be justice for the oppressed, food for those who hunger, freedom for the prisoner, sight for the blind, a place of respite for the wandering stranger, and, of course, sustenance for the orphan and widow.
22. The widow's mite story is not about tithing to the church. The story is not about careful budgeting. Instead the passage can be read to make a crucial three way connection among human suffering, human justice, and the underlying love of God for God's children in all situations. The passage pulls together in one profound connection,
 - a. first, human suffering, as seen in the suffering of the widow;
 - b. second, the need for human justice, seen here in the wealthy scribes devouring the homes of poor widows through dishonest dealing, and
 - c. third, the deep abiding love of God which both sustains those who are suffering and pushes the unjust towards acting with justice.
23. This is a crucial three way connection.
24. Recall that the Gospel passage opens with Jesus saying to the disciples, Beware, beware of the scribes who are unjust. Jesus is asking the reader to Be aware. Be aware of these three things. Be aware of how they are connected.
25. These three things are realities in the life of each person here this morning. The St. Thomas community gives each person here the time, the place and the words for awareness of this inter- connection. Let our worship together this morning deepen our connection to each other in mutual support in our sufferings and in joys. Let our worship deepen, as the Psalm says, our connection with the Holy Spirit beside us and guiding us, always.
26. Today, at this table, Jesus offers what you have been hunting for in your heart of hearts. Here you will not be a disappointed hunter.
27. In Jesus' name, Amen.