

Proper 27 Year B

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.

Eight or so years ago, during the Bayou bash, an old extremely disoriented woman wandered into our parking lot on the other side of Ann Street. Some of y'all may remember. She was unkempt, her mien of gray hair matted; her clothes were tattered; she smelled the way the extreme poor smell; there was a look of desperate panic in her eyes; she couldn't remember where she lived; she couldn't even remember her own name. I became a little panicked as well because I couldn't see a way to help her... she just kept saying over and over again, as if to muster a faint trace of hope, "I believe in Jesus!" I called the police, who I felt might know how to better deal with such matters, but before they arrived, a neighbor who apparently had seen her front door wide open, and knew of her plight, tracked her down, recognized her and took her home, back through the chill and dark of the night from whence she came. I can still see her...her wanting dark eyes...the despair in them...I hadn't seen her before, nor I have seen her since. She may be dead now. "I believe in Jesus," she said... How could she, I thought? How could a loving God allow such a wretched estate? Why would she presume that God is a God of Love? Back across the street amid the glow of our party we feasted and reveled up and against the dark of this cool autumn night... The days getting shorter... dead leaves scuttling down Ann Street in the indifferent wind.

Throughout Hebrew scripture we are reminded that God has a passion for the widow and orphan, the alien, the outcast...God, of course, loves all of us...but God's peculiar passion is for the poor and the dispossessed, the widow and orphan, the most vulnerable of the social structure...time and again God reminds the people of Israel that their first and foremost duty is to care for and dignify the marginalized of our world, the ones lost on the periphery...we are not complete without them...God is not complete without them....God continues to pursue their salvation amid the dark of our world.

And here, today, amid the terse narrative of Mark's Gospel we see the widow again, front and center, a phantom from the annals of Hebrew scripture, the sacred lore of the people Israel...the widow again... As the child is claimed from the periphery, as the blind beggar steps from the margins of existence to center stage, so too does the poor widow....she comes from the shabby, and unkempt streets, and steps into the Temple, the

very center of the universe for the Jews....This has now become a pattern in Mark.... Jesus and his followers reaching for the margins to claim the lost... and in today's narrative there is Jesus watching the recurring drama....and he can't keep silent. We have just heard Jesus rail about the hypocrisy and greediness of the Pharisees and scribes....the well to do, the elite, who when they give, they give from their surplus...these Pharisees and scribes who don't see his vision of the way God would have us live.....the widow, like the blind beggar, whom we heard from two Sundays ago, does see....she sees what is required....what it takes to live together...It takes all that we have...all that we are ...a life lived utterly for the greater good... she sees that all that we have to live on belongs to God... Makes for a great stewardship sermon doesn't it? The poor quaint widow, the model of the generous giver, the patron saint of stewardship, she....The preacher might say: Dear people of God, it is not ten percent of what we have that we give, though we'd be in fine shape if we did... We give all that we have. God wants our all....but there is more here in this passage that we can't ignore.

Jesus is not just saying that we give far deeper than our surplus; that we give from our flesh to the bone, all that we are; but he is also offering a compassionate lament....a lament. He has just finished warning us of the Pharisees and scribes, the elite who are cozy with the status quo, cozy with the powers that be, the self-sufficient who, as he says, devours the house of the widow....who in their own greed devour that held in trust for the least, the orphan, the widow, the under-served....He points to her...see! This is what I'm talking about....See this widow...How could we dare accept all of what she has for the Temple treasury, and not be convicted of our own responsibility?.....and that responsibility is forever spoken of in scripture.... feed my poor....take care of the widow....attend to my least....and it takes an abused widow, the least of the least, just like the blind beggar...it takes an abused widow's faint, and perhaps naïve hope....to convict us that she, and all the least in our world, are our responsibility. In her poverty and despair, she is yet a symbol of hope, else she wouldn't be coming to the Temple with an offering in the first place. She is the hope of the poor, the hope of the world.

The wealth of the world is now greater than at any other time in history...exponentially greater....and the poverty, the poverty of the world is as well..... "I believe in Jesus"..... the poor Ann St. widow says from a disoriented mind caught in the snares of disease and poverty....yet a mind that clings to hope....a spirit that cries out for help... cries out for the truth in a world wealthy and a world poor.... A world of the dignified and a world of squalor and indignity... Why the gap?

Friends of God... as the raised and living body of the Christ...it is for us to give the widow a reason to believe....let us be convicted by her desperate hope....a hope crowded and belied by the weight of the world.... We are the beneficiaries of God's Grace... and that grace is for us to share... God's grace... we say that a lot.... And what have we said? For me God's grace is the gift of free will.... The Calvinists would have us believe that human free-will is our undoing... but free will is the gift of choice whereby we always have the option to live for love... the option to live selflessly... the option to do the right thing.... The option to live into the possibilities of love... So the people of faith, the people of conscience... the mindful are the means of God's love, which without us lies fallow.... Rendering ridiculous the notion that God is self-sufficient... that God doesn't need us.... God needs us desperately... God needs us to love... and the time is now.

Brothers and sisters it is for us to say no to the gap... no to the abyss... No, to the disparity between wealth and poverty...between shame and dignity....let us be the bridge, the bridge of the Baptized, which is the very Gospel itself coming alive and bringing life....let us give the widow a reason to believe, a reason to hope.....and us.... all of us... a reason to believe as well.

It strikes me that the church has made a near fatal error in teaching that God is out there, or up there... apart from us.... In fact in our very catechism in the Book of Common Prayer the question is asked "why then do we live apart from God? How absurd.... Brothers and sisters God comes to us disguised as our very life. It is for us to be mindful of that. It is for us to live the very hope that is within us, handed down to us from generation to generation. It is for us to live as God lives, giving ourselves away for the restoration of all things.... It is for us to give the widow a reason to believe... It is for us to give life to the hope within her.... And it is for us to recognize that her hope, the hope of all those on the margins, as improbable as it would seem... that their hope is a sign of God's imminent coming....their hope an artifact from the future God's favor.

God comes to us disguised as our life... Make the most of it... Make the best of it... Live it for love... so that all may say... I believe in Jesus.

