

8 November 2009

The Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost, Year B

Mark 12:38-44

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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“Keep your eye on the ball.” That is what my Dad used to tell me while trying to teach me to catch. “Keep your eye on the ball.” We have since come to acknowledge that I am famously uncoordinated such that no amount of coaching can cure it, but as we all know, “keep your eye on the ball” is a great life lesson.

“Keep your eye on the ball,” Jesus tells his disciples across from the Temple treasury. It would have been easy, with everything that is going on there, all of the finery and grandeur, all of the fancy officials with their beautiful robes marching about, to get distracted and forget to watch for what is important.

“There,” he says, “there, did you see it? That... that was important.”

I can only imagine our poor befuddled disciples looking a little confused as the ball flies right over their heads. Star-struck as they watched the shining celebrity Pharisees, they completely missed the little widow as she dropped in her tiny offering.

But Jesus does not pay any attention to the glitter and glam of the Temple officials strutting through the square. He focuses instead on the widow and her act of humility and of faith.

“Come on!” Jesus coaches again, “Keep your eye on the ball.” Know the world around you, notice everything, but then focus on what is of true value. Focus in, grab on to it and do not let it go.

We hear a lot about widows in the Bible. Widows are the epitome of weak and defenseless. It should be noted that this was pre-women's rights, so bracket that for a moment. Widows, without the protection and income of a husband or father, were unable to care for themselves and their children. They were relegated to a low caste, useless, a burden. The widow's sacrifice here is huge, costly, frightening.

But despite this life, the widow still came to the Temple. She still gave to the glory of God and she gave generously and fully.

Seems on the surface like Jesus is romanticizing poverty, but this is far from the case. Instead he is criticizing the very systems that create it, a system that says giving from what is extra rather than from what is essential is just fine, a system that says that God condones extravagance when many are starving.

No, Jesus does not commend the widow for being poor. He instead commends her for being faithful, for truly trusting that God is with her in her plight.

You could substitute any vulnerable group for the widow and have the same outcome: children, strangers, the sick, the outcast. They were supposed to be under the care of the religious establishment. A portion of the Temple offerings were to go to the care of the most vulnerable in society but that apparently didn't always pan out.

Jesus points out the dramatic gap between the temple officials and the widow with her last two coins. Jesus is admonishing those religious leaders who, time and time again, ignore their God-given duties to care for the most exposed in favor of flaunting their own status. Jesus uses the widow as an illustration to show us how the misuse of power has rent the fabric of the very society he has come to save.

Jesus instructs his followers to reject social standards that value power and influence over all else. Inherent in that instruction was a critique of those religious authorities who used their own positions, their own power and influence, to systematically destroy those populations, like the widows, that they are duty-bound to protect.

And furthermore, teaches Christ, those in the religious community who practice this kind of abuse of power are even deeper at fault as they use the name of God to mask what they are doing.

The widow's offering could be seen as a really bad use of her last coins. She was, after all, giving the last of her meager existence to the selfsame establishment that had proven itself untrustworthy to care for her needs and certainly unworthy of her generosity.

But this is Jesus' point. This is the ball that we should be watching: this is not about money. This is about faith. The widow gives those coins to the Temple. Not to the established hierarchy and not to the corrupt government, but to that which she sees as a symbol of all she holds dear in the world: her God.

Her faith has told her that her contribution is important. Her faith has told her that God will take these coins and make something happen. She is so committed to what the Temple bears witness to, she dismisses the corrupt humanity. Her giving declares God is greater than your corruption.

Her eye is on the ball.

There is so much for us to watch in the world. There is so much to look up to, to look around at. We have so much to worry about so much to envy and we have so much to want. There is so much distracting us from, as Geoffrey says, what is of

true and ultimate worth. When there are so many balls in the air, it is hard to remember which one we are supposed to keep our eyes on.

Then a story like this one comes along.

So where are we in this schema? Are we the poor widow, giving generously of what we have because of deep faith that God will make good out of a corrupt system? Are we followers of Christ, recognizing the corruption of power around us, striving against it, working to change it? Are we more like the religious leaders who climb the ladder of power ruthlessly always looking for more power, more influence, regardless of who gets destroyed on our way up?

Well, friends, if you are anything like me, and I know that some of you are, we are all of these things, any one of them at any given time. At our best, we are both generous and radical. At our worst, we are selfish and power-hungry.

When our eyes are on the ball, we are the former and we profess that a life of faith is a life of abundance and not scarcity. There is plenty. When we are the latter, we've lost focus. The ball goes sailing by, we struggle and hoard and the world suffers.

We believe in a God who values abundant faith over abundant wealth. That is why Jesus was a wandering carpenter and not a rich-robed king. That is why he entered this world through the body of a young woman rather than descending down from the clouds surrounded by the heavenly host. Jesus is not that obvious. He wants us to be paying attention.

The widow gives all. Foreshadowing the self-giving of Jesus on the cross, she lets go of all that she has.

This woman is worth watching. In her giving all to God, she reminds us that all that we have is God's. In watching her, we can see the gift of life and grace that God provides for us and the whole creation. In this gift we receive all that we need and are freed so that we might give of ourselves to God and to others.