

“When the Small Is Great, and the Great Is Small”

King Canute, II reigned during the eleventh century. He was the first Danish king of England. Like many kings, Canute was surrounded by people who always praised and flattered him. His advisors would declare, “O King, there can never be another as mighty as you. There is nothing that you can’t do. Nothing in this world dares to disobey you.” Eventually the king grew tired of such foolish speeches. One day as he walked along the seashore with his advisors, he said, “You say I am the greatest man in the entire world. And you say all things obey me?” And his advisors responded, “Absolutely! The whole world bows before you and gives you honor.” “In that case,” said the king, “bring me my chair and we will go down to the water.”

So they scrambled to carry his royal chair over the sand and to the water’s edge. When the chair was put in place, the king sat down and surveyed the ocean before him. “I notice the tide is coming in,” the king said. “Do you think it will stop if I give the command?” His advisors were puzzled, but they did not dare say no. So they responded, “Give the order, O great king, and the ocean will obey.” And so the king did. He waited a moment, and quietly a tiny wave rushed up the beach and lapped at his feet. King Canute shouted, “How dare you! Ocean, turn back now! I order you to retreat before me!” But another wave swept in and curled around the king’s feet. And the tide continued to come in, just as it always did.

The water rose higher and higher. It came up around the king’s chair and wet not only his feet, but also his robe. When that happened, the advisors wondered what the king would do. But King Canute said, “My friends, it seems that I do not have quite so much power as you would have me believe. Perhaps you have learned something today. Perhaps you will now remember there is only one King who is all-powerful, and it is he who rules the sea, and who holds the ocean in the hollow of his hand. I suggest you reserve your praises for him.” Some say Canute took off his crown soon afterward and never wore it again.

Today’s gospel lesson from Mark has always made me uncomfortable. For one thing, Jesus begins by criticizing the religious leaders who craved public attention and acclaim ... who offer “long prayers” ... who wear long robes ... and who enjoy prominent positions at big banquets. I wear a long robe on Sundays that covers a multitude of sins, as well as food and coffee stains. I like respect ... but of course, at this point in my pastorate career with so many embarrassing moments ... it’s tough. And occasionally, I have been known to go on and on in prayer and story telling. Even Jesus’ observation of “rich people” offering gifts to God at the temple makes me nervous. Though I don’t consider myself “rich,” when I compare myself to the majority of the world’s population, I realize I am very wealthy.

To further add to my nervousness, Jesus points out this poor widow and lifts her up as an example ... a model. He not only notices the widow, whom most of the crowd overlooks, but also sees the magnitude of her gift, “her whole living.” Jesus says: “*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*” (v.44).

We hear from today’s lesson a couple of messages that are particular to Mark’s Gospel. For one thing, there is a rather constant barrage of criticism of the powerful and the influential. Then, there is the abundant attention given to poor and the vulnerable. Moreover, there is the theme of the in-breaking of the God’s kingdom. When the kingdom of God comes near to us, the world breaks forth into various kinds of praise and thanksgiving. One way that we praise God is through offering money. The poor widow gave from more than a sense of duty or legal obligation. Her generous, unselfish giving strikes a cord of overflowing gratitude and praise. Her gift is perceived by Jesus, not as a harsh sacrifice, but as a noteworthy expression of the kingdom.

When the kingdom of God comes, there is healing, exorcism, and joy. I believe Jesus is telling us that we need to be healed of our love and worship of money; that we need to be exorcised from the demon of materialism that holds us captive. Upon close examination of Jesus’ teachings, we find that 75% of them directly or indirectly refer to money and wealth. And so we need to seriously ponder the way that the advent of Jesus and the kingdom of God can overturn our natural inclination to hoard and accumulate, and transform us into generous givers. In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus bids us to notice this poor woman, a person we might have overlooked in our inclination to notice only the wealthy and the powerful. We need to see this woman as a parable ... a model for joyful Christian generosity.

The gospel lesson, as stern as Jesus ever spoke, warns us against three things. First, it warns us against the desire for prominence. Jesus says that people are given special responsibility in his church, particularly clergy; and they must regard their calling, their office, as a responsibility rather than a privilege. One does not earn a calling, but one renders selfless service to the people of God, which is the responsibility of any church officer. This is why I am uncomfortable when I read about Jesus' criticism regarding the scribes prancing around in their long robes and stoles. This passage makes me very self-conscience ... and you know what ... that's good!

Also, Jesus warns against the desire for deference. Almost everyone likes to be treated with respect. And yet a basic fact of Christianity is that our faith ought to make us wish to obliterate self rather than to exalt it. There is a story about a monk in the old days, a very holy man, who was sent to take up the office of abbot in a monastery. He looked so humble a person that, when he arrived, he was sent to work in the kitchen as a bus boy, because no one recognized him. Without a word of protest and with no attempt to take his position, he went and washed the dishes and did the most menial tasks. It was only when the bishop arrived a considerable time later that the mistake was discovered and the humble monk took up his true position. Respect does not come from holding a position. Respect comes in being a servant of Christ and a servant of Christ's brothers and sisters.

The third warning by Jesus is against any attempt to traffic religion for profit. Jesus made a concrete charge against the scribes: "They devour widow's houses ..." It is unclear if this refers to actual real estate rip-offs where widows lost their homes or if the scribes simply "bled" the widows with their constant harangues to support the temple. But it is clear that using religion to pilfer vulnerable people out of their life savings is wrong. Specifically, Jesus is issuing a warning to people who are in the church for what they can get out of it and not for what they can put into it. It's that simple. It's not the size of the gift, but the godliness of the giver.

That truth may surprise us as it must have surprised the disciples back then. Jesus upsets the popularly held opinion that the wealthy have obviously given more than the poor widow has given. On the contrary, according to Jesus, it isn't the amount but the sacrifice and devotion behind what's dropped in the offering plate; whether or not it's truly a gift or just a contribution. In a sense Jesus is saying ... it's the *why* of it, not the *how much* of it. To further understand this I refer you to a line from an Aesop fable about a pig and a chicken being chased around the farmyard by a man who wanted ham and eggs for breakfast. The pig ran faster, so the tale goes, because the pig knew it would have to give its all, while the chicken only had to make a contribution.

In any case, today's gospel lesson probes the contradiction in our lives between the religious and the socioeconomic spheres. It calls for a wholehearted self-giving that transcends dollars and cents, and begs the question, "Why do we give?" This calls to mind another story I once read about a pastor at the bedside of a 90-year-old widow whose entire pension check was given over to the nursing home to pay for her care. After listening to her apologize for not contributing to the church, he protested by saying to her that it was not expected and that she had given many years of service to the church. She raised an angular finger in his face and said with a rebuke that he will never forget: *Young man, you listen to me. I am not talking about the church's need for money. I'm talking about my need to give. I should not be deprived of the opportunity to give.*

Why do we give? Deep down we know from experience we will receive something more in the way of personal fulfillment in return. Giving builds fiber in our spirit. Giving enlarges our lives. Giving brings joy. Just as a writer must write ... and the painter must paint ... and the musician must make music ... so the human spirit must give in order to truly feel alive. *And just as a rose pours forth its fragrance with abandon and a songbird pours forth its song without measuring it, so the wise, generous spirit gives with a like sense of abandon.*

Money is a gift of God. Like any of God's good gifts, money may be abused by us, even made an idol ... especially when we give ultimate homage that ought to only be given to God. God has given us money so that we might show praise through the generous offering of our gifts to do God's work in the world ... as a sign of God's presence among us. We may feel that we have not much in the way of material gifts or personal gifts to give to Christ, but ... if we give all that we have ... and are at his disposal ... Christ will do things with it and with us that are beyond our imaginings!

Prayer: *O Lord, who has taught us that to gain the whole world and to lose our soul, is great folly... grant us the grace so to lose ourselves that we may truly find ourselves anew in the life of grace, and so forget ourselves that we may be remembered in Your kingdom. Amen. Reinhold Niebuhr*