

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time`
Ruth 3: 1-5; 4:13-17
Mark 12: 38-44
November 11, 2018

Widows' Houses

In the first congregation I served as a full-time pastor, there was a widow named Georgia Lee Farmer. Slight of stature and white-haired, she could easily have been mistaken for a sweet old lady of the old school, the kind who crochets toilet roll covers for fundraisers, irons the linen cloth for the Communion Table, and keeps the nursery on Christmas Eve. Just a kind old soul who would never harm a fly.

Well, Georgia Lee did all of those things, but she was a force to be reckoned with. She didn't exactly run the church, but she scared the Dickens out of those who did, especially the young pastor fresh out of seminary who assumed that the church would be governed according to the *Book of Order*.

Georgia Lee could stretch a dollar farther than anybody I've ever known. When she served ham sandwiches for a church meeting, the slices of ham were so thin, you could read the King James Bible through them. After every covered dish supper, you could find Georgia Lee sifting through the garbage, looking for plastic knives and forks that profligate Presbyterians had thrown away after using only one time.

Georgia Lee grew up during the Great Depression. Widowed early, she raised four children on a kindergarten teacher's salary. "Disposable" was not a word in her vocabulary.

I know for a fact that Georgia Lee was a tither – not because she told me so, but because the church treasurer did. Each year when the pledges came in, he'd record the meager figure that she'd put down on her pledge card and placed in the offering plate. Because he was also the president of the local bank, he knew better than anyone else that, unlike certain other members of the church, Georgia Lee was a truly sacrificial giver.

I once asked the treasurer if he thought I should know who gave what to the church. "Don't look," he advised me. "It's bad enough that I have to know. Just know that when Georgia Lee recycles plastic cutlery, it's not because she's stingy. It's because she's generous."

At one time I thought that today's passage from the Gospel of Mark was a kind of homage to the Georgia Lees of the world, the hardworking, penny-pinching widows who know the value of money but can be generous to a fault. Nowadays I'm not so sure.

The scene comes toward the end of Jesus' public ministry, just before his Passion. This is his last appearance in the magnificent temple in Jerusalem, where he has been critiquing the entire system upon which the religion of his day rests.

In today's text he takes aim at some scribes. Watch out for those fellows in long robes, he warns (current company included). They like to live in the limelight, to get the best seats in the synagogues and to sit at the top table at banquets. When called upon to give the invocation, they offer long, wordy prayers, but "**they devour widows' houses,**" Jesus says.

What do you suppose that means? "**They devour widows' houses.**"

Well, observe that happens next. Jesus sits down opposite the treasury in the temple and watches the people as they make their contributions. Apparently, the procedure went like this: You brought your offering and gave it to the priest. The priest then counted it and announced the total to everyone within earshot. (I hope the Stewardship Team is listening. This is bound to beat passing the plate.)

- The Smiths: \$2,000.00. Thank you, Brother and Sister Smith.
- The Joneses: \$5,000.00. God bless, you Mr. and Mrs. Jones.
- The widow Farmer: Two copper coins. Move on, lady. You're blocking the line.

But Jesus is watching closely. He observes that those who give large gifts "**contribute out of their abundance,**" but this widow has given everything she has. Out of her poverty she has given "**all she had to live on.**"

Is Jesus commending the widow for her faith, or is he condemning a religious system that bleeds people like this widow dry? I'm pretty sure his comment is a further critique of the scribes he has just criticized. "*You devour widows' houses, and here is a case in point.*"

Read this way, this story raises uncomfortable questions for the life of the church today. It puts Jesus in the front pew this morning, taking note of what we do with the money in our treasury. Are we building up the kingdom, or are we erecting a temple to our own religious egos?

I *think* I know the answer. It appears to me that this congregation does a rather good job of spending money in the right places for the right reasons. But as I was dawning my “long robe,” after having written my “long prayer,” for the day, it occurred to me that I am not the best judge.

Jesus watches a widow give away her last two coins, and prompts his followers look at this scene from God’s perspective: “Is this really what the Lord requires? Is a temple built on widows’ mites really built to the glory of God?”

Dallas Willard, in his book *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, talks about churches you’ll never see on TV or read about in the tabloids, churches impacting their communities in ways both profound and untold.

One church I know, on realizing their endowment had grown beyond what they were comfortable with, began to periodically call the city offices and pay down months of residential utility bills that were past due. The people never knew who took care of their bills. Another congregation purchases milk for morning snack for all the kids in their rural school district. Only a scant few, among them the school superintendent, are aware of where the money comes from.

At a conference a couple of years ago, I met a member of a little church in rural Arkansas that wanted to reach out to their neighbors. They did a little bit of research and decided that what a lot of people in that area needed was a way to wash their clothes.

So, one Saturday each month, this little Presbyterian church rents out the only laundromat in town, and invites anyone who wants, to come, wash their clothes, and just sit and chat for a while. People come from miles around. A church member serves up hamburgers and hotdogs, and the church folks hand out quarters for the machines, sit with their neighbors, and just visit.

“Most of the folks who come to washday on Saturday don’t show up at our sanctuary for worship on Sunday,” the church member told me, “but we feel like Jesus is with us on both days. I imagine him sitting across from the bank of clothes dryers. I hope he likes what he sees.”

The motto of the Reformed tradition, as you probably know, is “*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei.*” It means, more or less, “The Church reformed, always to be reformed according to the word of God.” In this text, that living Word is sitting across from the Communion Table, watching us.

I was sitting outside Hopkins Eatery a few weeks before the election, enjoying a luxurious sandwich, and found myself trapped into overhearing a conversation between two men at the table near mine.

“There aren’t 47 million uninsured people in this country,” one of the men said. “It’s more like 30 million, and if any of them walks into the emergency room, they’ll get seen. We didn’t need this socialist healthcare reform in the first place.”

Inside my head I’m saying, “But that’s not *healthcare*, you blunder head. That’s *emergency care*. It’s not the same thing.” But I just sat there, gritting my teeth.

After a few minutes of conversation in a similar vein, the man began to talk about the wonderful experience he had had at the Mayo Clinic. “I didn’t even know I was in danger of losing my sight,” he said. “A regular checkup found the problem. They did eye surgery on me, and the care I got was first class. And what’s more, it didn’t cost me a dime. My insurance and Medicare paid for the whole thing.”

And if that man had been a widow in her fifties, too young for Medicare and not quite poor enough for Medicaid, that story could have been very different. It could have been a story about a widow who only has a few coins left in her purse. She can spend them on food or she can go to the doctor. Either way, her house will be devoured.

To follow Jesus sometimes means to sit with him and observe the systems we live by and prosper from. The church is one of those. The healthcare system is another. Before we pat ourselves on the back for being such faithful followers, we should ask ourselves what Jesus might say about the temple we are building with our systems, with our money, and with our lives.

In other words, just when we think we’re reformed, it’s time for reformation.