

I would certainly be remiss and overlooking the obvious, if I didn't begin my message this morning with an acknowledgement that it's been an emotionally intense week for our nation with the conclusion of a fiercely fought presidential election, as well as other political contests for public office or public policy. Presidential elections are always divisive, and this one was particularly so, causing significant polarization among our population that often made its way into our relationships with friends and family members. Heated rhetoric and intentional distortion have become a part of civic discourse, and certainly it would be important for all of us, as brothers and sisters in Christ, to speak and act in ways that are respectful and patient and kind, regardless of how we feel about the election results. Whether we feel like our "side" won or lost, we are now collectively left with a bruised and divided country. It may feel like everything is so big and overwhelming and way above our pay grades, and we may be at a loss as to what we should do now. I saw some thoughtful words about this, written by Venice Williams, a writer on spirituality who works with hunger programs, posted on social media numerous times, and I'm just going to share a bit of her writing. She said: "Pull yourself together. And, when you see me, do not ask me "What do we do now?" Continue to do the good work. Continue to build bridges not walls. Continue to lead with compassion. Continue to set the best example for the children. Continue to be a vessel of nourishing joy. Continue right where you are. Right where you live into your days. Do so in the name of the Creator who expects nothing less from each of us." I found her words inspiring, regardless of how we feel about the election results. What do we now? We do what we can. We do our part. Just as we always do, as followers of Jesus. That's the kind of faith and courage that Jesus models, the kind of faith and courage to which we aspire, and the kind of faith and courage that we discover in our Scripture lessons for this morning.

Look at our Scripture lessons for today. Both lessons, 1 Kings in the Old Testament and our Gospel lesson from Mark 12, feature a poor widow. Remember that a widow was at the bottom of the food chain in ancient societies, including Israel. A woman depended on her father or husband or grown son to provide her daily needs, since she had no substantial rights, property or money of her own. A woman without a

man to provide for her was destined to poverty. And we have two such women featured in our lessons today: each a poor widow, but a poor widow who acts courageously and faithfully. Here's an irony though—there shouldn't *be* any poor widows amongst the Hebrew people of the Old Testament or within the timeframe of the Gospels. Why? Because again and again, God commands in Scripture that widows and orphans be cared for; that the rest of society make an effort to protect the vulnerable who might otherwise end up in poverty. Sounds great, doesn't it? Like so many of our efforts to eradicate poverty, too---and yet, there are still plenty of poor widows to go around in these Bible stories, just as there are plenty struggling in poverty today, even in a country as richly blessed as ours. This may be a bit of reality therapy for us: poverty is not easily eradicated, has many complex causes, and demands constant attention. We must *always* be vigilant in our efforts to see that the most vulnerable among us are protected and not abused or overlooked. These two particular widows in poverty, however, have some surprises in store for us. Each of them, in fact, might be held up as being heroic in a simple way. What way is that? In the spirit of the reading I just shared, each of them, facing difficult circumstances, does what they can. They do their part.

In the Old Testament lesson, the unnamed widow we read of is on the edge of despair. She has only enough food left to prepare one meager meal for herself and her son, and then she expects to await a slow and painful death from starvation with her child. She lives outside of Israel; she is not even of the Hebrew people. She is, therefore, an extremely unlikely candidate for God to choose as the one who should keep the prophet Elijah in bread and oil for his stay in that area. Elijah is relying on this woman to adhere to the crucial principals of offering hospitality in the ancient world. In times when life was perilous, strangers were to be given sustenance. Moreover, our text states that God had commanded this widow to feed him, so Elijah is probably feeling fairly confident about his request for some water and bread. The unnamed widow, however, apparently didn't get the memo and is understandably reluctant to assist when she herself is on the edge of dying from hunger. In response to Elijah's request, she replies with words that no Scandinavian Minnesotan would ever want to have to say to a guest: "I have nothing baked". No lefse, no cardamon rolls, no sour dough bread, does this hostess have to offer her unexpected guest. Of course, it's much worse than that---all she has

left in the world is a handful of meal and a little oil. She's intending to bake a final loaf of bread to feed herself and son, and then give up. How can *she* do anything for Elijah? But Elijah tells her, "Do not be afraid. For thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail." Basically, Elijah is telling her, "The Lord will provide." Sure enough, against all reason, this poor widow rises to the challenge. *She does what she can do*. She shares of her very little with Elijah, and the bread and oil did not run short, just as God said. God worked a miracle here, but which was the greater miracle: the multiplying of the bread and oil, or the willingness of this poor widow to be generous in her poverty? In the face of challenging, even dire, circumstances, *she does what she can*.

The Gospel lesson provides us with a somewhat similar scenario, another poor widow, who is willing to do her part, to do what she can. We need to put this brief lesson in the larger context of Mark's Gospel. Prior to this lesson, Jesus has stormed into the Temple and driven out the moneychangers, shouting at them that they were making the Temple into a den of thieves. He has set himself at odds with those in religious authority. He continues along that same line as our lesson begins. He condemns the Scribes, saying, "Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

Clearly, Jesus is on a roll here. He criticizes the religious elite for putting on a fine show, while doing something truly repugnant—and that truly repugnant action is to devour *widows'* houses. In other words, instead of obeying the numerous Scriptural injunctions to care for those most vulnerable in their society, which included widows, the Scribes are taking advantage of the widow's vulnerability to further impoverish these women in order to gain more for themselves.

As if to further his point, Jesus then watches a crowd give offerings in the Temple. He sees rich people put in large sums out of their abundance. In contrast, he sees our poor widow put in 2 small copper coins. Yet, he tells his disciples, she has given more than all the rest, because she is generous in giving even when she has so little for herself. Jesus is making several points here: he is critiquing the overall economic/religious system

which feeds off of the most vulnerable, and he is pointing out that it's not the size of your giving that matters, it's your *willingness to give* it. To do your part. *To do what you can*, even under challenging circumstances.

Our circumstances *are* challenging, yes. We have lived through the upheaval of antagonistic national and local elections, and certainly our own particular community has been hit hard recently by deaths and illnesses. We're worn out. We may feel we have little left to give, but these stories hold up for us that we're simply asked to do what *we can*. We're not asked to do what we can't---for example, to change the world or our country or our even our family singlehandedly---but rather we are asked to do what we can. Make the offering. Bake the bread and share it. *Do what we can*.

But to see these lessons in relation to ourselves in a little different light, compared to these poor widows in our lessons, our circumstances are not as extraordinarily challenging as their's, are they? They too lived with political and national upheaval as a matter of course. Early deaths and devastating illnesses were commonplace in their ancient world. Along with that, they've lost their husband, their emotional security, their financial security. Compared with them, we are in fact fortunate, for the most part. Blest. Gifted. Does that reality make our calling any different?

I recently read a devotion in which the writer was delighted to stumble upon an unwanted batch of Japanese walnuts in a wooded area. Thinking of all the ways she could use these walnuts, she saw them as a gift from God and a gift from nature. However, upon taking them home to crack them open to harvest the meat within, she learned that the cracking and harvesting were far more tedious and labor intensive than with standard walnuts. She spent hours working with this gift to be able to use it. This reminded her of a saying she grew up with: *the gift becomes the work*. The gift becomes the work. Isn't that true, in a variety of ways? Beyond the work of utilizing what we harvest from our gardens or in the woods? Phil and I recently were so fortunate as to receive a legacy from his father's estate; now we have to manage and steward it appropriately. We're meeting with advisors, we're learning new things. The gift becomes the work. Honestly---many of us are gifted, either financially, or with talents, skills, wisdom, or just exuberant personalities. How fortunate we are to be gifted! But the gift becomes the work. We use our gifts to do our part, to do what we can. Whether we

are poor widows with very little or people who are relatively privileged and gifted in a variety of manners of abundance—the calling is the same. We do our part. We do what we can do. And it makes a difference! Elijah, the widow, and her son are fed throughout a famine because of her willingness to do what she could. The Temple in ancient Palestine; our church in present day Knife River, Minnesota, are supported because all of us contribute our offerings to that cause, just like our widow in the Gospel lesson. Because of our giving to God's Barnyard, families in developing nations around the world are fed. Because we assist with the Elder Care tree, elderly care center residents will not be forgotten at Christmas time. Because of countless volunteer hours, the Two Harbors food shelf is a going concern. Because we support a congregation that seeks to be the heart of our community, there is a place for anyone to come and be welcome here, to find friendship, to experience hospitality, to be nurtured in their faith. Doing what we can do makes a difference. Are you struggling? Don't worry about doing something grandiose, just do what you can. Are you blest, gifted? The gift becomes the work. Use it to do what *you* can do, to do your part. Make no mistake, this requires faith on our part; faith to trust that God does provide; that God makes a way forward even in difficult times. But God gifts us even with that faith, and as we use it, God does good and life-giving things for others through our simple efforts. It's all about doing what we can, as followers of Jesus, day by day. Amen.

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