



Office of the Presiding Bishop Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

2009 Churchwide Assembly Service of Holy Communion

Saturday, Aug. 22, 2009

Texts: Acts 2:42-47; Luke 20:45-21:4

Sermon by the Rev. Linda O. Norman, chief financial officer, ELCA Development Services and ELCA Foundation

Widow's Offering

"In the hearing of all the people he said to the disciples, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love 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.' He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.'"

It's an ironic thing to be wearing a long robe and preaching on this text where Jesus is rebuking the scribes because they like to wear *their* long robes and have the best seats in the house. I was kind of hoping that I wouldn't have to wear an alb today. But, it serves to keep me humble.

Humble—and reminded that Jesus *doesn't hesitate* to call out religious leadership. He called out the establishment for their hypocrisy. And he called out the *quiet* religious leadership of one person who probably never got a seat of honor or had people listen up when she spoke.

She's unnamed and voiceless in our Scripture text today. And although most people probably didn't recognize her as a religious leader, Jesus did so immediately. He knows that she is a teacher.

I too think that she is a teacher who has a word for us. In my preparation for this day, I've spent time listening and learning from her. And hearing what resonates as her voice. I invite you to come with me for a few minutes to lend her our ear.

[Widow]

I often dreamed as a little girl, and I had hopes as a young married woman. But after my husband died, *everything* changed. In my day a woman without a husband had limited options. And since I had no sons or male relatives to take me in, most of *those* options were beyond my reach. I would most likely live the rest of my life in poverty.

My dreams turned to nightmares. Each day I woke up, and it hit me again that I was now a *widow*. I didn't know whether to cry or scream, so I did a lot of both. I asked God to teach me *how to survive* this new thing called widowhood.

After a few days, when the food started running out, I was praying for daily bread. And God reminded me about the widow who served Elijah and how her jar never emptied. I remembered the story of Ruth and Naomi surviving together. I realized that *'struggle'* has never been a stranger to us, and that God has always carried us through. I trusted God to carry *me* through.

I relied on that faith, even as my life became one of taking handouts. Wherever I went, people assumed I'd be asking for help. And the truth is, I usually was. I have to accept help every day to survive. That is

my station in life. I'm reminded of it every time I have to beg for food, or every time I decide to go hungry because I don't want to be a burden for just one day.

Of course, I'm not alone. There are so many people who are barely making it from day to day. But do you know what I've noticed about them, about us? There's a posture that people carry when they're poor. And I'm not just talking about people like me who are living in poverty. There are rich people, too, who are poor.

Do you know what I mean? The rich woman who feels inadequate because what she has doesn't look like enough. She walks around with the posture of an impoverished thinker.

This day I chose to actively resist wearing the posture that says I'm the charity case who takes from everybody and has nothing to give. Despite all outward appearances, God has never left me without *something* to give.

Almost subconsciously I found myself walking over to the little jar I keep to hold my money. There were only two of the copper coins in there. How do you give 10 percent of a penny?

Some would say what I had to give wasn't even worth offering at the temple. Remember the last time you had absolutely nothing, they'd say. But *I didn't* have nothing. It may not have been worth much, but I *had* something to give. I decided to give it all.

I pulled my two coins out, looked at the empty jar and closed the lid again. And then I held those precious coins in my hand as I walked to the temple.

I had planned on heading straight to the temple treasury, but it wasn't easy to make it through the crowd. They told me that Jesus was in the temple. I had heard about him, about the time he turned the changing tables upside down. But I had never heard him speak before, so when everybody was gathered around listening to him, I listened in, too.

I was shocked to hear a religious man speak that way. What did he say again? Yes, that the scribes "devour widows' houses." It was almost as though Jesus was speaking just for us widows, carrying our voices and saying what we could not have said ourselves.

And somehow, in listening to him, I knew there God was. Challenging me, challenging all of us to behold the possibility of a radically different future. What would a future look like where greed does not exist? Where everybody has enough and nobody has too much?

I had forgotten myself for a moment there. I told you, I'm not one to dream about the future. I make the most of today. And today I still had my two coins.

I walked over to the treasury with the wealthy. They in their robes, me in my rags. With a prayer I made my offering, gave my last two coins.

When I said amen, I returned to listening to Jesus. He was talking about a poor widow. He said that she had put more into the treasury than all of the rich people combined. I *looked* for this widow, wondering where she had gotten such a sum of money.

But when I turned around, I saw that Jesus was looking directly at me. I wasn't certain that he was talking about me. I don't know what the rich people's 10 percent amounted to, but my offering couldn't *possibly* be more than theirs.

Except that Jesus went on to say that the widow had put in all she had to live on. I wouldn't have thought that Jesus knew about my little jar, but somehow he did, and he insisted that what I had to give was more valuable than they (or I) realized.

I can't describe what changed for me that day, except to say that was the day I started dreaming again. Dreaming God's dream for the world.

After Jesus looked up and saw me that day, I kept my eye on him. He too ended up offering all he had to live on, even his very life.

And after he died and was raised, I kept my eye on the growing community that bore his name. The people in that community, they started to sell all their possessions and give to all as any had need. I watched that community until I finally became a part of it. I, too, gave what I had and received what I needed.

There had been a lifetime of people who kept everything they got and still they never had enough. But I finally found the place where we can give everything we have and never run out. This. This was it! I was living the radically different future that Jesus started me dreaming about.

Life according to God's abundance is not just a dream for tomorrow. By the power of God, it's also the *reality* of today. And in a world oppressed by impoverished thinking, living that abundance is the calling and the testimony of faith.

So, whatever your station in life, have courage: There is no scarcity in God's economy.

Have courage: Whom God has made rich, the world cannot make poor.

Have courage: Everybody has something valuable to give. My journey has taught me that. And now I give it to you. Amen.