

Poor Widows – God’s Heroes I Kings 17:8-16 Mark 12:38-44 Rev. Brian BB

Sometimes God uses very stark and surprising pictures to get our attention. In both this morning scriptures, poor widows, who we remember have little power or status at that time, offer everything they have to God. Everything. The gifts are meager by economic standards, two small coins, one simple meal, and yet these gifts are greatly honored by God. Jesus reminds those who love to give big gifts in order to be lauded and proved to be righteous, that the sacrificial gift of this woman is a greater offering than their own large sums. Especially for those who use their position as religious leaders to take the homes of such poor widows which they could and did in that male dominated society.

Not quite 10 years ago, Ted Turner received a lot of attention for a charitable gift to the United Nations of One Billion Dollars. He said he had been inspired by a Mississippi woman named Oseola McCarty. Miss McCarty was not well known. She spent a lifetime making other people look nice. Day after day, for most of her 87 years, she took in bundles of dirty clothes and made them clean for parties she never attended, weddings to which she was never invited, graduations she never saw. She had quit school in the sixth grade to go to work, never married, never had children. All she ever had was the work, which she saw as a blessing. Too many others in rural Mississippi did not have even that. She spent almost nothing, living in her old family home, cutting the toes out of shoes if they did not fit right and binding her ragged Bible with Scotch tape to keep Corinthians from falling out. Over the decades, her pay -- mostly dollar bills and change -- grew to more than \$150,000. "More than I could ever use," Miss McCarty said without a trace of self-pity. So she is giving her money away, to finance scholarships for black students at the University of Southern Mississippi here in her hometown, where tuition is \$2,400 a year. "I wanted to share my wealth with the children," said Miss McCarty, "I never minded work, but I was always so busy, busy. Maybe I can make it so the children don't have to work like I did."

Both these gifts are amazing. And generous, but which one is really bigger? Ted Turner, who made most of his money developing Cable TV channels, had a net worth at that time of \$ 3 Billion dollars. (Parenthetically \$1 Billion of that was made overnight with his deal with Time Warner.) So he gave 1/3 of his total worth... in a way. But his gift is over 10 years. \$100,000,000 a year. Again, not chump change. But, even though it is too simplistic, think of the gift this way. If Ted Turner put 2/3rd of his worth - \$2 Billion dollars into a 5% CD, the interest each year would be \$100 Million dollars. Now I know that only leaves him \$ 1 Billion dollars to live on, but perhaps he might be able to use grocery store coupons to squeak by. And by the way with the recession, etc, Mr. Turner's net worth remains at \$2.2 Billion dollars, so he is still ok..

Now I know it is too simplistic. And don't get me wrong, if someone feels called to give \$100 million dollars to Faith United Church of Christ, we would not turn down the gift. But Jesus asks us to consider, which gift is bigger, the Billion dollars or the \$150,000 - all of Miss McCarty life savings. Which gift is more generous?

Having lived near Cleveland for many years in ministry, I had the privilege of going to our denomination offices where national boards met. Our Wider Ministries were having their annual meeting one year and I met several of our missionaries who shared some of their experiences. These good and faithful folks are the ones we support with our One Great Hour of Sharing offering as well as our OCWM. There were many stories of sacrifice and faith. But one in particular struck me.

Dale and Betty Schwicker, told of being near Bethlehem in the Palestinian region of the West Bank. They went to work at the YMCA – which had a rehabilitation program for those with disabilities. They worked with those injured and maimed in the violence, they worked with play groups for children traumatized by seeing violence. They explained to us that they hoped to develop a swimming program for everyone in the area. An area where the Palestinian people are so crowded there are no parks or recreation areas for the children. Dale and Betty were at that meeting because the YMCA building, by virtue of its 3rd story built

especially for the play groups for traumatized children, became the target for an Israeli Rocket and now is a two story building again. Betty and Dale spoke of the fear they had the night the electricity was out because a transformer had been blown up and the gun shots were firing all around as they sat in the dark, pressed to the floor. Then, with tears in her eyes, Betty shared with us these words written about what happened that same night to the Palestinian director of the Y: Nadir.

“Finally I am taking a rest, not from demonstrating or throwing stones, but from answering my daughters. They are asleep now, but when the bullets were firing all around, we lay flat on the floor in fear. My youngest daughter said, “Will the bullets kill us, Daddy?” “Not if we lay on the floor.” I said. My older daughter screamed over the noise, “Daddy why did you make windows in our house when you built it?” I tried to comfort them by reminding them that we believe in Jesus and he will protect us. My youngest daughter said, “He must stop the bullets soon, Daddy.”

But sacrifice is not just modelled on foreign soil. We are privileged this week to hear about the work of hundreds of people in Manatee and Sarasota Counties to pay for and build houses for those in need of shelter. Habitat for Humanity is a brilliant and effective way we can make a real difference one house, one family at a time.

This week we also remember the service and sacrifice offered by Veterans who put themselves in harm's way to protect and defend others. The willingness to do this kind of service is one of the greatest human achievements - to put other's safety and well-being above one's own survival. It is truly amazing that there are people willing to do that through serving their nation. It is amazing too that people will give much of their precious time and treasure to build a house for another person. And what of our missionaries? People like Nadir, and the Schwickers who live in dangerous places willing to risk their lives to help those in need. Scripture gave us two widows who gave everything they had; A Rural Mississippi woman named Oseola McCarty gave so others could rise above where she spent her life. All of these people challenge us to Christ-like generosity, not just in terms of our money, but in terms of our whole lives. These faithful people inspire us. Inspiration

that challenges us to understand God's standard of giving. What do their stories mean for how we spend and give our money? And what do their stories mean in relation to how we should live our lives and give of our time and talent? AMEN

I Kings 17:8-16

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink." As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." But she said, "As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. 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 until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth." She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

Mark 12:38-44

As he taught, he said, "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."

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For 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."