

Giving Self-Fully
1 Kings 17:8-16, Mark 12:38-44

After my Mom and my Dad got divorced when I was little, my Mom and Brother and I moved in with my Grandmother. My Mom was trying to make sure that my Brother and I were fully taken care of. She gave up some of her autonomy as a parent to do that. I know she disagreed with her mother sometimes about the best way to raise us, but my co-parent and I sometimes disagree about the best way to parent our kids. My Mom put the well being of my Brother and I above her freedom to parent as she wished. She wanted there to be other adults who had input in our life, and I think she also wanted to make sure her Mom was ok. My grandfather had passed away just before my parents were divorced, and my Aunt is a doctor - her schedule was pretty busy.

We started to go to church immediately upon moving back, and before long, my Mom was giving her time and energy there as well. She became the head usher, and then a deacon as well. She would get to church before everyone else to get the pot of coffee on for coffee hour, mix the lemonade and set it up in the kitchen. She made sure that there were Bibles and Hymnals and offering envelopes in every pew. She made sure that the right pews had the seats and cushions that some of the people in the congregation needed. During the service, she helped guests find a seat and made sure they were taken care of.

When one of our friends needed a ride, my Mom was the first to say yes. I rarely heard her say no when someone asked for help. If she did, it was because it conflicted with something already scheduled, or with making sure her kids were taken care of. Over the years she hauled wood, helped people build structures, brought food to the sick or those who had recently lost a family member. She took care of other people's kids without complaint. My mom didn't make a lot of money - she gave faithfully to the church, but it wasn't what she wished it could be - so she gave of her self instead. People sometimes ask why I went into ministry. There are lots of

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reasons - a church full of them - but my Mom was the first minister I saw working every day, giving constantly, and satisfied with the reward.

Elijah is a prophet in the time of King Ahab. Ahab is married to Jezebel, a princess of the Sidonians, and she brought with her the worship of her gods, including Baal. Ahab worships those gods, rather than the God of Israel. Elijah goes to Ahab, and prophesies that there will be a drought in all of Israel. He then leaves the court of Ahab and goes and hides in a wadi, a drying riverbed, on the far side of the Jordan. God sustains Elijah, by sending food with the crows who come to drink from the wadi. But as the drought progresses, when the wadi dries up, Elijah is forced to go find food and water elsewhere. God sends him to a village in Sidon, where Jezebel comes from.

Thanks to the marriage between Ahab and Jezebel, Sidon and Israel were at peace with one another, but there was no real friendship between the nations. They each looked down on the other as worshipping an inferior god. Sidon at this point likely felt they had the upper hand, since the King of Israel was worshipping their Baal, instead of the God of Abraham. Elijah's garb and style of grooming would easily mark him as a devout follower of the God of Israel, so the woman identifies him on the outskirts of the village as a foreigner. When he asks for some water, however, she goes to give him some, even though there is a drought. He then asks for food.

"As the God of your people lives," she says, hoping that he will understand her desire to be truthful by invoking his deity, "I have no food, but the little bit I'm going to go prepare so that my child and I may have a final meal before we die." The drought had hit the whole land, and Sidon was as dry as Israel. The people were dying of starvation, even water was scarce, making her willingness to give some to this foreigner all the more important. Elijah promises that if she has courage, if she brings him some food from what she is preparing, her jar of meal and her jug

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of oil will not run out. Together they go and she takes him into her home, feeding him as he said, and miraculously, the jars remain full. They are able to eat for many days, feeding not just them but others as well. In her giving, to one she might have looked down on, there was plenty.

On Monday, Jesus had come into the temple and started yelling, flipping over the tables of the merchants and moneychangers in the outer courts. He quoted the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, proclaiming that the temple was not meant to be a den of robbers, but a house of prayer for all nations. The outer court was the place that foreign worshippers of God were supposed to pray, and with the outer court taken over by the merchants and moneylenders, those from other nations had no place to worship God. Jesus challenged exploitative and exclusionary religion, and his actions, in line with the prophets of old in words and dramatic performance, fascinated the crowd, protecting him from arrest. The religious elite were probably worried this was the first action of a violent insurrection, one which could lead to Rome massacring the Jewish people, but it didn't happen. Sometimes Mondays are rough.

Tuesday had been quieter, with the authorities seeking a way to break Jesus's hold over the crowd so that everyone goes home safely, arguing with Jesus, and Jesus doing some real teaching too. Jesus was teaching something new, but based on the traditions and scriptures of old, and the crowd was eating it up. If there was no violence, the leaders figured they could weather the storm. When Jesus offers his denunciation of the scribes, it's easy for us to just lump the scribes all together. But no group is a monolith, having only one view. In fact just a few verses before Jesus had told a scribe, the same group he now denounces, that the scribe was very close to the Heavenly Realm. For that scribe understood that sacrifices and offerings are nothing compared to love of God, and love of others, and love of self.

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This denunciation is not for a scribe seeking to understand Jesus's teachings, but for those scribes who abuse the laws and teachings of the Jewish scriptures, who ignore the prophets, who by any standard, including our own, we would call unjust and unloving. A scribe was an important person. When there was a dispute about a document, the scribes were called in to make a legal determination. If it was a property border, or a clause in a contract, the scribe could drastically affect how that was read by the parties. Just as the prophets condemned the judges of Israel centuries before, who took bribes such that to be poor and go to court was already to have lost, Jesus condemns scribes who do the same. Scribes who are well thought of, upstanding members of the community, who also do not seek justice, but to further the business interests of their patrons and friends. Not irreligious people, but rather faithful attenders of worship services, well spoken, careful scholars and lawyers titling all their *yods*, and jotting all their *iotas*. It is easy for the wealthy to be considered righteous because they have the power to declare themselves so, and the time to take actions which cause them to be perceived as such. But Jesus, in the line of the Jewish prophets of old, is more concerned about justice for the least and the lost, for the orphan and widow, for the foreign residents, than maintaining the status quo.

Towards the end of the day Jesus and his followers head away from the crowds to a different part of the temple, perhaps to pray for themselves. From where they are standing, they can see the treasury of the temple, and people coming up to offer their monetary donations personally. Since Passover was a holiday which saw people from all over Judea and Galilee, and the Jewish diaspora throughout the Mediterranean and Near East, flock to Jerusalem, it makes sense that foreigners of means would come during this pilgrimage to make their donation personally. This was a public declaration of piety, power, wealth, and privilege. Many probably brought their sons, showing them both the importance of, and the benefits of donating to the

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temple treasury. Many probably gave gladly out of their abundance, expecting their monies to be used not just for the upkeep of the temple but to help sustain the poor in Jerusalem. Jesus has no comment about the stacks of money being thrown into the temple until a widow comes forward and puts in two of the smallest coins *leptas*, functionally two pennies. Then Jesus comments to his followers that the widow has given the greater amount, because she has given, in her poverty, all that she had. The text is translated, “she...has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.” But a more accurate reading might be, “she has put in everything she had, her whole life.”

I think its important to note that Jesus does not condemn the giving of the wealthy as insufficient. What they are giving is what they are giving. But seeing a woman, a widow the text tells us, which means someone socially vulnerable in that culture and time, give causes Jesus to reflect not just on the money that she put in, but the faith she puts in with the pennies. Jesus says that she has given with those two pennies “her whole life.” This widow, like the scribe from earlier in the day, is choosing to love God with all her heart, her mind, her soul, her strength, which is shown in her donation of the last two pennies she had to rub together. Jesus, perhaps through whispers of the Holy Spirit, knows those two pennies are her last, knows that the way she lives in her community is as selfless as her donation to the temple. She doesn’t just give the money and consider her donation complete, but knows a true offering to God is one of time, and talent, as well as treasure. A true offering to God is feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, and welcoming the stranger.

Regardless of where you stand on the outcome of the election, it is always time to give to God. If you’re troubled by the results, you know that there are many who will need our help now more than ever. If you feel empowered by the results, know that it is very likely that the number of people we count as among the poor, the disenfranchised, and the oppressed is likely to grow

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significantly over the next four years. And just as it was your obligation as a follower of Christ to help those in need before the election, these results do not, and cannot change that. Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of God, which I prefer to call the Heavenly Realm in the Here and Now, because it was never predicated on who sits on the throne, on who occupies the White House, that is near. Instead, the coming of that day when it is on Earth as it is in Heaven, that day when all people are recognized and able to live actually as siblings together, no matter their nationality, their ethnicity, their age, their wealth, their gender, their sexual orientation, their religion, that day will come when we cast off the blinders that make us think these things are more important than the simple truth that every person you ever will meet or could meet is also a beloved child of God. If your world is not what you want it to be, then you give of yourself to make it change.

It will take giving of our whole selves. Yes our money, to the extent we can do so. Yes our time, to the extent that we can do so. Yes our talent, in however we have been gifted. It will also take great courage and little kindnesses. Great courage to continue to love even when hate is all around. Great courage to invite others to come join us in community, and at the welcome table, the best way for any church to grow. Great courage to speak truth to power, to love deeply even when we would not prefer to. And little kindnesses, a hand of welcome for someone outcast, a meal for someone hungry, a drink for someone thirsty, clothes for someone naked, shelter for someone unhoused, they will make all the difference. Give pennies, give courage, give kindness.