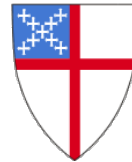


Sermon for the 25th Sunday after Pentecost, Nov. 14, 2024
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner



[Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17](#) [Psalm 127](#) [Hebrews 9:24-28](#) [Mark 12:38-44](#)

Dear friends, it has been quite a week in our country. Our Election Day is over. We now move forward with the realities and results – both benefits and costs, both blessings and curses – of our collective decisions. So it is in any election. Many are feeling elated, and many are feeling distressed. But we have yet to see what will actually unfold, and what other circumstances in the world will bring to bear on the years ahead. So it is with any election.

No matter what our position, no matter how we voted and how we now feel, we hold kindhearted and respectful space for each other and for those around us. And we continue to commit ourselves to move forward each day in the name of Jesus Christ and following Christ's way.

OK, let's begin with what I need to make sure we address at least once this month. Let's talk about generosity, giving, and stewardship.

This is that point in the year when we ask everyone at St. Luke's to think and pray about how they can contribute to the ongoing ministry and mission of our church in the coming year.

I want to mark first of all the incredible generosity of people in our recent fund drive to replenish funds used for our facilities and for special ministry initiatives. It looks like we have met and exceeded our goal to replenish these funds, all while we are continuing to honor our different pledges that support our day-to-day ministry. We are continuing to ensure that this church will have a witness to the boundless love of God through Jesus Christ, for the people of this city and region.

Our scripture passages today at one level show us generosity of people and of God. The book of Ruth is all about generous devoted care being given, by Ruth to Naomi, by Boaz to Ruth, and today by Naomi in her crafty matchmaking that brings Boaz and Ruth together. The section we heard from Hebrews shows us a vision of Jesus Christ giving himself for the sake of all people across all time – once for all, and forever before God on our behalf. And the Gospel passage from Mark points to remarkable generosity that a poor widow gives, from all that she had.

Our shared impact with each other and in the world around us is because of our generosity – with our time, our energy, our finances, our hearts. And let us remember as we plan our giving, that this is the Lord's house and not our own. "Unless the Lord builds the house, their labor is in vain who build it." God, please let this house always be for your glory and for the spreading and sharing of your boundless love.

So, yes, the widow in the Gospel helps us see tremendous generosity. But... the widow also helps us see tremendous risk. And, as we let the Gospel encounter sink in more deeply, we are left with hard questions.

Why did the widow give all that she had left? And, why was this all she had?

Jesus has been observing the scribes and the temple system with deep concern and growing frustration. He sees hypocrisy and artificial holiness and claiming of privileges and abuse of a system that was supposed to protect and serve widows and orphans. And then he sees wealthy people giving generously but in a very showy and public way. And then he sees a poor widow give her last small coin – a coin worth about one-eighth of an hour's wage – at today's average wage of \$24, a mere \$3, not enough for a good meal – and at today's lower entry-level wage of \$16, a mere \$2. He knew that it was all she had left. Jesus points her out to his disciples. And we are left with questions.

Why did the widow give all that she had left? And, why was this all she had?

We don't know.

All we see is the moment of her action.

Pastors in town that I get together with spent a lot of time in our discussion this week about this text, trying to get a sense of whether this was a good thing or a bad thing that she gave all she had. We talked about the Jewish temple system, the Roman Empire, and her, to try to understand more. Here are just some of the thoughts we had:

- There was corruption in temple system and temple tax system;
- But, the temple was a refuge for people with a common heritage, in the cruel world of the Roman Empire.
- There was a sense of pressure from the temple system to give;
- But, the temple provided financial and healing help for people, and continued to provide a way for people to live out their faith.
- The woman may have given in full trust and gratitude to God;
- But, the woman may have given in sense of winning God's favor and earning a blessing or good luck;
- Or, the woman may have given in sense of obligation to the temple and her culture and people.
- Why did she give all that she had to live on? Why not buy something to craft, make more money, start a small business?
- And where was her family? Does she have anyone to help care for her?

In the end, we don't know any of these details. And to Jesus, they don't matter.

In this moment, Jesus is simply observing, watching, and noticing. He sees her, and knows what she is doing. He sees others, and knows what they are doing. And he makes an observation, and points it out for his disciples to notice – helping them to pay attention in a different way than they were before.

I wonder if Jesus or any of the disciples had a conversation with this woman. I can't help but believe this must have happened.

What if you were there with Jesus, and he pointed the woman out to you and noted for you what she was doing? How would you respond next?

Some of us may be prone to begin making judgments and drawing conclusions right then, or later in conversation with our friends as we walked away from the scene or left the city.

- Is she a welfare mom?
- Is she in her right mind?
- Is she just making a bargain with God?
- Isn't she amazing, how much she trust God to provide for her? Poor soul.
- Is this just blind faith?

- What kind of family would just leave her to her own devices like this?
- Where were the temple priests to take care of her needs?
- Does she get a handout regularly from the temple?
- Aren't any of these other wealthy donors noticing her and taking care of her needs?
- I thought Rome was supposed to provide help for people like her. Where's the government when you really need them?

I can only imagine how the imagination got stirred up and spun out for some of the disciples.

But these folks know nothing more than what they first observed because Jesus drew their attention to the woman and her gift. All the rest is a bunch of assumptions, presumptions, and inventions in their own heads. They know nothing more than when they started.

Some folks may have jumped from seeing the woman to big generalizations, ideals, and blame games. You know the routine –

- Oh, these poor people make such bad decisions with their money
- Well, that's just the way of things in this hard-knock life of the world – C'est la vie
- There but for the grace of God go I
- Why is the world so cruel to so many people
- This would never happen in the old, free Israel of ages past
- Rome has made our world a cesspool, a hell-hole
- This is what happens when there is a welfare state
- This is what happens when there is a free-market economy
- It's Herod's fault
- It's Caesar's fault
- It's religion's fault

And so some will chase the wind and fight with shadows cast on the wall of the world in their minds, and know nothing more than when they started – but will feel better having laid blame and painted an explanation.

In the end, though, Jesus is just making a simple observation, and helping the disciples see something they might not have seen.

Some will go with Jesus to meet the woman. And maybe one of them, or Jesus, will ask a question:

- ❖ Woman, I saw that you gave all you had to the temple? Why? What led you to give your last penny?
- ❖ Woman, where will you eat tonight?
- ❖ Woman, what is it that you need?

These questions open doors to learn more about the widow, directly from her, in her own voice. And her responses will take us beyond all our automatic presumptions and judgments.

There is a saintly woman in Arizona, Kaze Gadaway, a faithful member of the Episcopal Church who has for several years into her 80s loaded and taken donated backpacks with warm waterproof clothes and food to homeless people in and around her city. About once a month, she would post summaries of some of her encounters with people – and the poignant, heart-wrenching things people told her, and their disbelief at her meeting them and talking with them like real human beings.

When we approach someone and enter conversation, and ask questions to help us understand, we are escaping from the traps of chasing the wind or racing after our assumptions. We are dropping the false reality of the hasty conclusions we have drawn about them. We are meeting someone openly, and letting them have the dignity of their own story – sorrows and joys, mistakes and mistreatments, deep beliefs and values that they try to follow, any and all of it.

This election has been full of presumptions, assumptions, and portrayals of people and groups and systems in all sorts of negative light – or, if they are “our” people or groups or systems, all sorts of positive light. And we now face the benefits and costs, the blessings and curses, the consequences of our decisions at the ballot boxes.

I urge you all now, and am telling myself now, to leave behind those presumptions and assumptions, and to commit my energy instead to observing, noticing, and asking questions. Don’t jump to conclusions.

There is a person asking for money. You can ask, “When did you last eat?”

There is a neighbor who puts signs in his front yard. You can ask, “What in your own life makes you care enough to put up a sign?”

With anyone here and out in the wider community, you can move beyond opinions to learn more about why things matter to different people, but asking the questions we are practicing with each other – “What do you love? What have you lost? Where does it hurt? What do you dream?”

These aren’t questions that accuse or assume. They are questions that show genuine curiosity, interest, and caring.

I don’t know about you, but I want to hear the widow share her story. I want to know, so I can understand, and so I meet her as a human being with her own dignity.

We ask these kinds of questions only as one of the ways we can open up a relationship and a possibility of living as caring neighbors with each other – truly getting to know each other. Because, we are each of us more than a set of slogans, labels, assumptions, portraits or caricatures. We are, each of us, and each person around us, the very image of God and beloved by God.

Hundreds of years before Jesus saw this woman give all she had, there were two other women who were struggling to make a living. Naomi came back to her native land after her husband and sons died, and one of her widowed foreign daughters-in-law, Ruth, came with her. Here they were, barely making it day to day, living on the outskirts of land owned by Naomi's distant relative, Boaz. Ruth went to Boaz's fields and collected scraps of wheat left behind by his harvesters. Boaz noticed her and what she was doing – and then he acted. He asked his harvesters to intentionally leave a bit more wheat behind so that Ruth could gather up more. Naomi learned of Boaz's kindness (and maybe his attraction to Ruth), and she came up with a scheme to get Ruth and Boaz together. And it worked! Now Ruth and Boaz were married, and Naomi had a more secure future for herself in Boaz's household. The women of the village had noticed Naomi and Ruth, and cared about them – and now they celebrated and were the ones to name Boaz's and Ruth's baby.

The whole book of Ruth, that short little book in the Old Testament, is all about *hesed*. *Hesed* is the Hebrew word for devoted loving-kindness – the kind of loyal, gracious, kindly, protective love of God for God's people that we are also expected to show to others. It's not just a warm feeling. It's a way of living and of giving of ourselves for others in caring actions.

Lovingkindness begins with paying attention, noticing, seeing with open and receptive eyes. When we pay attention to what is happening around us – when we tune in closely and take the time to see more closely – then we find ourselves opening doorways for relationships with people around us and right in front of us. And then we begin to do things for each other and support each other. It may be just small steps. But small steps today can grow into lifelong bonds and new ways of being with each other that we never ever imagined.

Whatever unfolds in the years ahead in this country, this state, this region, we each continue to live and to seek ways to survive and live as best we can. And so do all people around us. Come what may, we have each other.

So, friends – Onward. Rise, stand, continue to live and to give, care for and defend those in need. Pay attention to who is right before you and what is going on for them. Ask questions and be curious. And see where you are led. That is OUR work, OUR life, as citizens of the kingdom of God.