

Title: Risky Generosity
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Texts: 1 Kings 17.8-16 & Mark 12.41-44
Series: Pray & Consider: The Accounting of Stewardship
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Mark 12:41-44 (NRSV)

⁴¹ He (Jesus) sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³ 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. ⁴⁴ 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.”

I have experienced my share
of long hot summers
where it didn't rain much;
but the dry spells I've known
have never lasted
a really long time.....

Certainly nothing like the drought
described in today's lesson
from 1st Kings.

Our storyteller paints
a pain-filled picture
of the human costs
when water is scarce.

(LINGER.....)

The drought that casts
its withering pall over Israel
in today's story,
has come upon the land
because Ahab, Israel's king,
has turned from the Lord
and instead embraced
the small 'g' god, Ba'al!

In response
to this faithlessness,
the Lord commands Elijah
to inform Ahab
that there will be
“neither dew nor rain” in Israel
for a long, long time –
until the Lord
chooses to speak again.

The drought, it seems,
is not punishment

at the Lord's hand,
but rather what happens
when false gods are pursued.

And as horrible
as the drought is,
the author of Kings
wants us to see
that the dryness
of the land is nothing,
compared to the dryness
of the people
in the absence
of a word
from the Lord.

(SLOWLY)

Let me jump out
of the story
for just a moment,
and briefly make a connection
between the fumbling
faithlessness of Ahab,
and our time
here in the present.

In a day and age
when false gods
are constantly
pulling on us,
and enticing us
to make them the object
of our worship.....

We would do well to ponder
this cause and effect relationship:
that the Lord
is silent before
those who do not listen,
and those who
do not pay attention!

(SLOWLY)

Returning to our lesson.....

The Lord first instructs Elijah
to wait out the drought
by a wadi -
a small stream.

But before long
even the wadi dries up,
so next, Elijah is commanded

to find Zarephath -
a hamlet located somewhere
in present day Lebanon -
where there is a widow
who will feed him.

When Elijah locates her
at the village gate,
the nameless widow
is in such desperate straits
that she is gathering sticks
to warm a final meal
for herself and her son.

Still, Elijah calls to her,
and asks for water.

This request seems
thoughtless - even cruel.....

For the widow
is one of those
most adversely affected
by the drought.

“In this time
of national crisis,
her needs would be
considered last.”

Under Ahab’s faithless rule,
there was no such thing
as a social safety net.

Despite her situation,
the widow tries
to be hospitable,
and tries to be faithful.

She, who has nothing,
seems to understand
better than those
who live around her in abundance,
that God expects God’s people
to care for others.....

Even if the one needing care
is a stranger
who wanders into town
making impossible demands.

(LINGER.....)

As the widow
is taking water to Elijah,
he doubles down
on his thoughtlessness
by also demanding bread.

This second demand
is the widow's tipping point.
It is more than she
can physically or emotionally take.

She erupts in bitterness;
complaining to Elijah,
describing in no uncertain terms
what she is
in the midst of doing.....

Telling Elijah to
leave her alone,
so that she
and her child can die.....

Can die without the impossible
expectations of another
making a horrible situation
even worse.

(LINGER.....)

To these pain-filled,
and fear-filled,
and angry words
Elijah simply responds,
"Do not be afraid,".....

And then he explains
how the Lord will care
for all three of them.

And to the
great surprise of all,
the widow heeds Elijah's words
and begins to act,
to live without fear.

(SLOWLY)

"Here is a woman
about to die
with her child,
a mother unable to feed
her little boy,
who still manages to love
her neighbor as herself.

Yes, Elijah
predicts the miracle,
but she is the one
who sets the miracle in motion
by her trust
and her risky generosity.”

(PAUSE)

In our Gospel lesson
Jesus and his disciples
watch another poor nameless widow
place every bit
of financial treasure she has
in the temple offering box.....

Noting that the others
who are making donations,
are simply giving
out of their abundance.

Mark does not tell us
this widow’s motivation for giving;
but only that
she holds back nothing,
and gives without fear.....

Displaying a depth of faith
and trust that the Lord
will take care of her,
which, with the exception of Jesus,
puts the other characters
in the story to shame.

Here is another widow
daring to practice risky generosity.

(LINGER.....)

There is nothing but death
before each of these widows,
because of their actions.

Yet, neither holds back,
nor wavers in practicing generosity.....

And it is this generosity,
this risky generosity,
that I believe
must command our attention,
and our actions, today!

For these widows
risk everything –
including life itself –

to respond to God.....

While those around them
are instead paralyzed.....

Paralyzed by a
deep and overwhelming
sense of scarcity
that sees only limits,
that sees only hopelessness,
that sees only death.

This emptiness of vision
which dominates our scripture lessons,
is starkly contrasted
by the two widows
who see different possibilities,
and a different future.

Such possibilities exist for them,
I believe,
because they choose.....choose
to look at their lives
and the world around them
through the lens
of God's generosity.

Everything in each
of their experiences
is screaming fear,
is screaming despair,
is screaming for them
to quietly give into death.....

But these faithful women
refuse any response but trust.....

Trust in the Lord's generosity;
trust in the Lord's abundance;
trust in the Lord's future!

(SLOWLY.....)

There is much
for us to learn
from these two bold women.

Their stories are suggestive,
instructive for us today.

For as we try to
follow after Jesus,
who is undoubtably

God's greatest symbol
of generosity to us.....

As we try
to follow Jesus,
we must pay attention
to these examples
of risking all
as the proper,
the faithful response to God.

For it is
the risky generosity of Jesus
that makes all
the difference for us.

(SLOWLY.....)

In this season of harvest
when our normal celebrating
cannot be the same
because of the relentless pandemic
that still threatens to consume us.....

In this season –
especially in this season –
we are invited
to think and live and practice
risky generosity.....

Instead of only seeing scarcity
in the world around us;
instead of being consumed
by the fear
our perceived scarcity produces.....

We are invited to risk.....

To risk all;
to practice risky generosity
as it is modeled for us
by nameless widows,
and Jesus who loves us.

(LINGER.....)

I want to
challenge us today
to practice risky generosity
in one very specific place –
and that is
our practice of stewardship.

Our stewardship of the resources
God has entrusted

to our care.

Each of us
has been given
a measure of God's abundance.....

Abundance which God
expects us to share
for the good of all,
the care of all people.

Each of us
is invited and expected
to make faithful decisions
on how and where
we will share
this God-given abundance.

Each of us
is invited and expected
to practice risky generosity
as boldly as it is
modeled for us in scripture.

As we consider
how we financially support
First Presbyterian Church
in the present,
and how we will
financially support this
church we love
in 2022 and beyond.....

I invite us all
to let Risky Generosity
be our guide.

For as God makes clear,
it is only this
practice of generosity
that gives us life!

Amen!!!

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