

**Proper 27, The Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost, November 8, 2009, James Livingston, Seminarian.**

Yesterday, in the historic city of Gettysburg, PA, a game was played. Seminarians from around the country gathered their forces on the fields of Lutheran Theological Seminary. Among the teams, the Fighting Friars from Virginia Theological Seminary, a group that had been giving their all in practices all semesters leading up to this event. They were prepared to test their mettle. Spirits were high, confidence good, and the intent to remain safe and have fun was at the forefront of each of our minds. We gave everything we had to play our best. With a twisted ankle, a sprained thumb [show them], and a dislocated shoulder requiring a hospital run to show for our efforts, we felt low as we returned to our cars for the long drive home in quiet contemplation. It was an imperfect game. We realized that the referees had not actually read the rules as they applied to flag-football, for they called penalties that did not exist and failed to call those instances that were illegal. It was an imperfect game. Nevertheless, the Fighting Friars pushed forward, determined to give everything they had to win their games. All systems are flawed, but our willingness to put forth our best effort despite the glitches holds us apart.

This passage in Mark gives us two distinct areas of focus in the life of the faithful. The first half is a warning against the acts of faked religious piety that, underneath, reveal pretension and hypocrisy. But the second half is different. It tells us a tender story. A story of a woman, widowed, poor, who is moved to drop two copper coins into the collection for the local treasury. We do not really know what her true motivation is for following this custom, but I'd like to create with you a picture of this widow that helps us to understand her. We may believe that she is compelled by her sense of duty to the Torah as a faithful Jewish woman. Or perhaps, she does so because it simply makes her feel good. The passage does not tell us enough to know for certain the heart of the widow, but what we may know for sure is what is written. She, "out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." Everything she had. Everything.

Other translations of this passage vary slightly, especially where the end of the sentence is concerned. Our translation reads, "...everything she had, all she had to live on." The King James Version finishes the line with, "...even all her living." Others read, "The whole of her living," "all that she possessed", "her entire wealth", "all her living." So we have several nuances here, all slight variations of each other, yet each ending reads as if to clarify the sentence as a whole. As if to tell us who may not realize, "See? She is giving all her money, though she has very little." Are we to believe that this passage is really talking about her financial tithe? "But she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." When we take this to heart, keeping in our minds this picture of the widow we have conjured up, I think it says much, much more.

To help us with these translations, we can look at the word, "Bios" in Greek, which is where we get the word biology. "Bios" can mean "That by which life is sustained, resources, wealth, goods" but truer to the root it means "life." Life extensively. Simply life! When we read what Jesus said about her with this root in mind, it takes on a much deeper meaning. It is not the case that she gave just all her money, she has given her life! And for it she has been noticed by Jesus. She is the example of the life we are meant to live. We are meant to give all that we have, our selves, our souls, our bodies, even our whole life to Christ.

Let's get back to that picture we are creating for the widow. This woman is in a very tough position in her society. Widowed, so now she is to be taken care of by the tribe according to the Law. Poor, and she is to be provided for. She lives because others in the community care for her, see to her needs, give her all that she requires to live. If her situation has any parallel to the social care system we have in place today, we would probably be asking ourselves, "how well is she really doing"? We all are well aware of the overhaul that today's health care system is attempting, and it is happening because too many people are falling through the cracks. The system in place that depends on insurance companies to pay for medical attention and treatment is not inherently flawed, and it was designed to provide for as many people as possible. Still, many are left with what CNN reported this year was the greatest cause of bankruptcy in America. Yet our widow from the Gospel reading gives what little she does have. Now, despite what it sounds like, this is *not* the perfect place to add another appeal to our Stewardship campaign. Instead, I'd like to entertain the possibility that this woman knows she is giving out of her poverty to an imperfect system. She is donating to something she knows is not perfect, namely a system that she knows from experience tries its best to care for people like her, but still has a few shortcomings. Why is it imperfect? Because nothing on earth ever is. This system does care for the widowed, the poor, the orphaned, but as is the case anytime we put

people in charge of running things, glitches will occur. I would imagine that she knows this because it directly affects her life. Whatever the equivalents to endless red tape, hoops to jump through, and forms submitted in triplicate were in those days, I bet she's encountered the same headaches we have.

This does not stop her. She submits to this system because it sustains her, it feeds her, it watches over her as best it can. Even still, the system is not perfect. Jesus said, "But she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

When we read the beginning of the Gospel again we see with clarity the hypocrisy Jesus detests. Making a show of one's pious life is not an offering to God, but a desire for the approval of onlookers. What are these scribes, these teachers of the Law getting in return for their contributions? It may be that their reward is not a blessing from God but instead an inner sense of pride and accomplishment, one that gives an undeserved sense of entitlement to the best seats, the places of honor at banquets, people worthy to be greeted in the marketplaces with respect. They present themselves with false piety, and our poor widow has seen it.

If she has been noticed by the Messiah, there must be more to her than what we see in her actions. Even though Jesus warns us against those who make long prayers for show, I would bet that this woman is filled with long prayers all day long. For her, though, this is an ever present conversation with God, and she may be praying for just those men with the long, flowing robes. Jesus notices her because she loves her God with all her heart, soul, mind, and strength, and her neighbor as herself, the very teaching He gave in answering a scribe only moments before. When she tosses in those two simple copper coins, she is tossing in her life, her whole life, extensively, unreservedly! She is giving everything to support an imperfect system.

As a human race we are imperfect as well. Our systems are set up and run as best we can, but each one of us is limited by our own personal needs and wants. And yet, despite our imperfection we have been provided for by Christ. Our poverty is not from the inability to sustain ourselves, but we do still hunger for that which gives us true life. We seek an even deeper relationship with our Savior and Redeemer, and through the mercy of Jesus Christ we have had two copper coins thrown into the treasury on our behalf. As the widow has given of her poverty, Jesus has given even more! He has given His life for us, and by His sacrifice we are made whole, completed, filled to our outer most edges with His love, a love that knows no bounds. Where the widow has given of her poverty, Jesus has given of His life and love. Where the widow has given for an imperfect system, Jesus has given for our imperfection. He has given to us, out of His mercy, everything He has, an endless and perfect love so that we may live.