

November 14, 2021

1 Kings 17:8-16

Mark 12:38-44

GENEROUS HEARTS

Detectives – I grew up reading Encyclopedia Brown, Hardy Boys, and later Sherlock Holmes books, and I won't try to list all of the old television series of detectives that I have watched where various characters in wide ranging settings figured out some mystery. With each story, I was impressed with how the featured character deduced who had done some dastardly deed, and it often came down to motive. Since I generally couldn't figure out the mystery before the lead character did, I often was critical of the author, who in my view, didn't show enough clues to the readers to give us much of a chance to figure things out on our own. Or maybe I'm just not very good at noticing the right clues that open the way to solving the grand mystery. The good authors could tell stories about people who were in quite different situations than the reader and yet still there was a significant takeaway from the story.

We heard a couple of stories just now that make me want to put on a detective's hat. No crime takes place in either story, but they both reveal a situation where what is just and right is lacking. The stories are both about widows, who in that time and place were among the most vulnerable because of the societal rules that excluded women from doing certain kinds of work or having property listed in their name. So, we hear of two indigent women. The widow from Zarephath is caught in a time of great drought. We hear that with her last little bit of oil and flour, she is ready to prepare a last meal for herself and her child, after which she expects them to starve to death together. Wow! But the prophet, Elijah, assures the woman that if she shares of the little bit she has, then God will provide what she and her family needs. For some reason, she does so. The other widow is one who gives her very last coins to the temple, a religious institution that was supposed to care for her and others in their time of need, but it doesn't look like it will come through for her. Both women give all they have, but are these stories of despair, where each one is giving their all even while giving up all hope?

We don't find out their motives for giving. Do they simply have generous hearts? Are they naïve? We look for clues, but the authors really don't spell out the rationale for their actions. Miraculously, things end up turning out okay for the widow of Zarephath with God providing for the poor family as well as for the poor prophet. We don't know what happens to the widow that Jesus saw giving at the temple – her story is just a brief vignette with no earlier parts of her story included and no resolution that comes at the end. We can each pull out our magnifying glass and use it all we want and we won't find a clear motive for their actions.

Yet, there are other parts of these stories that do give us a clue about the motive of each storyteller. We see Elijah's strong faith in a God who would provide for the needs of the most vulnerable, and God comes through even when there appears to be no way to do so. In the second story, we see the faithlessness of religious leaders who are more interested in what other people think of them than in carrying out their role of sharing resources so all have what they need.

So, it seems that the mystery that the authors want us to focus on is the desired state of having trust in our generous God that allows us to begin to reflect some generosity of our own. In the second story, while we aren't told of the widow's motives for her action, we are told of the motive for the temple officials for theirs which was a focus on appearances over substance, something to be avoided according to Jesus.

This leads to a deduction that before we might be ready to give, there may well be some things we need to give up, according to the authors who speak on behalf of our God. The first thing to give up is the intense interest in pretending we are something we are not. The ministry of the temple at that time had devolved into a shallow religiosity that was disconnected from its purpose. It was more show than substance because the needs of the poor were not only being ignored, they were being made worse by the practices of the temple officials. The scribes tried to hide their misplaced values with fancy robes (I hope this one isn't too fancy). They put on a show with long prayers (you'll notice later on that I asked Aaron to lead our primary prayer today). Before we give, it is a good thing to ask whether this religious institution called Abington Presbyterian Church is fulfilling its God-given purpose. Are we proclaiming the gospel in word and deed to the diverse

community of which we are a part? Are we seeking to grow in our faithfulness as disciples of Jesus Christ? Are we reflecting the compassionate love of the One who gives us all that we have? We are called to be honest with ourselves and others about how we are doing with the resources that belong to God that are placed in our care.

A second thing to be given up is the typical understanding of what makes for a large gift. Giving of ourselves is a central part of our response to God's great giving to us. As Jesus is watching people offer their gifts to the temple ministry, he sees some wealthy people who were putting in large sums of money. But he measures the size of the gift not in amount, but in comparison with what each person has. Jesus does not encourage his followers to seek out praise for acts of generosity, but he does model and inspires such acts and he celebrates them.

One more thing to be given up as we look at these two stories is the attempt to find what motivated the poor widows to give basically all they had. The clues just are not there. What is more important is that we compare our own motives for giving generously or not with God's clear motives for giving so generously. Are our motives based in a sincere desire to serve God and neighbor or a sinful desire to hoard what has been placed in our care or to pretend we are something we are not? Do our actions reflect a deep sense of gratitude unto God for all the blessings we have received? Do they reflect a yearning to be more generous people who not only meet charitable needs but also address the need for just structures in our society and in our world? Do our actions reflect the joyful giving that Jesus Christ models for us?

I am reminded of another story of poor people giving generously. Some years ago, I was blessed to be able to travel to the Democratic Republic of Congo to visit some Presbyterian missionaries who were serving in a place of extreme poverty. There was a Presbyterian hospital there which literally saved many lives of those who were severely malnourished. While I was there, I got to preach at the worship service for the Presbyterian church in a little village called Tshikaji. This was a village where there were only small huts for shelter. There was no electricity and no running water. It was subsistence kind of living for all who were in that part of the Congo. The church gathered under a roof that had no walls and only dirt floors. People brought their own stools to sit on during the

service. The most amazing part of the service was certainly not the sermon that was translated to the congregation that day. It rather was the sermon that the people who came to worship preached when they participated in the offertory. There was one large basket at the front of the sanctuary into which people were invited to contribute. There was joyful music being played as people came forth. Many of them danced as they came forward to put what they could in the offering basket. They seemed to be expressing what was in their hearts instead of putting on something for the appearance of it all. Was it an expression of joy that they could participate in God's ministry to provide for the basic needs of others? Were these gifts an expression of gratitude for what God had provided them? I don't fully know their motives, but I saw clear evidence of joy in their giving that is a vivid and inspirational memory for me unto this day.

There is One who places in our care all that we have and are. If we give up our shallow religiosity, if we give up inadequate definitions of generosity, and if we give up the search for someone else's motivation so that we find our own inspiration in God's joyful generosity, then our giving can move us closer to a right relationship with God and neighbor. And we won't have to be the best detectives in the world to deduce such a thing would be a great ending to the story! Thanks be to God. Amen.