

Proper 27, Pentecost 24. Nov. 8, 2015. I Kings 17:8-16; Mark 12:38-44.

As you have hopefully been able to tell, we are now deep into our annual giving campaign: that time of year that we set aside to reflect on what we have been given and what we feel called to give. Each week we have had parishioners stand up at most services and tell us a little bit about what St. Christopher's means to them. We have mailed brochures and pledge cards. And next week we'll ask you to go ahead and let us know how much you plan to contribute financially next year, so that we can write our budget. Depending on how well we keep our focus on God's gifts to us and the many different ways that we have opportunities to serve, it can be a beautiful, spiritual, meaningful time of the church year, or it can be awkward, grasping, and generally icky feeling.

Today's texts from Mark and I Kings give us ample opportunity to increase the icky feels. I Kings gives us a fine example of how not to run an annual giving campaign: "Ah, you widow, it looks like you're about to die. Please give us some water and, garcon, perhaps the last of your bread. Then you may go home and die." And I guarantee you that somewhere in America right now a church is hearing about how this passage from Mark means not that even the smallest gift is precious, but that your gifts don't count until they hurt . . . so pay up. They shall receive the greater condemnation.

Of course each of these stories does tell us something about giving. The widow in I Kings reminds us of the fact that God often saves us through the extraordinary work that we are called to do, the extraordinary gifts that we are called to give. When Elijah encounters her, she is ready to go home, eat a final meal with her son, and die. But in the act of giving more than she realized she had, of taking care of this wild and stern stranger, she is saved. I think it's always true, whether through miracle or not, that you run out of stuff (whether it's money, energy, hope, or flour and oil), then you turn your mind to feeding someone else and you find that you have much more than you had thought.

And our other widow, in Mark, teaches us that no gift is despised. Notice that Jesus does not condemn the rich people giving big gifts to the Temple. There's nothing wrong with that. He simply points out that the greatest gift is the one that no one notices, the one that doesn't get you an automatic seat on the board, the gift of all you have when most people are convinced that you have nothing worth giving. The rich are able to give a large gift, perhaps without even feeling the pinch of it, without even thinking too much about it. But the widow's gift can't be just a routine act. Because it is everything she has, her gift is necessarily an act of faith, of hope, of love. This story doesn't necessarily tell us that we need to give until it hurts, but it does tell us that we need to give with our whole selves, that when we give (and I'm not just talking about money here), it should be an act of hope and love. So there is plenty about giving, here.

But something happened to me last week that convinced me that what these stories really have to say to us this morning isn't about giving. At least the story from I Kings this morning, rather, has something to tell us about receiving. We in the church talk a lot about the spiritual practice of exercising and distributing our gifts. We perhaps don't talk enough about the spiritual discipline of receiving gifts from others.

Here's what happened to me. I was walking down here to church from our apartment when I ran into a Streetwise vendor. Many of you may be familiar with

Streetwise. As far as I know, it's a very cool organization centered on helping people who are sleeping rough. Streetwise is a magazine and the vendors are mostly homeless or transitionally housed folks. They buy a certain number of magazines and then go out and sell them for a set price. The profit margins for the vendors are razor thin, like below a dollar per magazine. The idea isn't really about anyone making money—it's about stability, responsibility, personal interaction, and learning some basic customer service skills. I try to buy one whenever I have cash on me.

This particular morning I only had a twenty, which I figured was probably too much to ask the vendor to break. I assumed that she didn't have a big wad of cash with which to make change and the magazine is only like two bucks. So I expressed my regret and told her that I would come back by later in the day when I had broken my twenty and buy one then. And she paused for a moment and then said, "You know what, go ahead and take the magazine. I'm here on the weekends, but usually on weekdays there's an African American man who sells Streetwise on this street corner. Just give him the money the next time you walk by."

Here's the mystery of God's economy: it isn't the content of the gift that matters; it is the act of giving and, concomitantly, of receiving. Elijah, by all rights, had no business asking this woman to feed him. This is especially so because in an earlier passage, Elijah had at God's command declared a drought to punish a wicked king. The whole country has had no rain and severe weather always affects the poor the most. Elijah played a direct role in bringing this woman near death. But this widow's act of giving mysteriously saves her life. And that act of giving required Elijah to be willing to receive, even from someone who, it seems, was much worse off than him, someone before whom he was maybe a little bit guilty.

It can be hard to give but for some of us, it is even harder to receive. Because receiving a gift implies lack, it implies need, incompleteness, imperfection, a failure in self-sufficiency. But that's just the thing, isn't it? It is just possible that we are incomplete, imperfect, not quite self-sufficient. And so the practice of receiving gifts can, finally, be a reminder of an essential characteristic of being human: that most of us are not quite whole yet. We are still trying to receive wholeness. And so receiving and savoring gifts from unlikely sources puts us in a posture from which we can receive from God. All unlikely gifts are practice for receiving the grace and love that God is constantly sending our way.

I was not prepared to receive the extravagant gift of the Streetwise vendor that day. I managed to do it, to take the magazine, but this simple gift showed me how far I have to go when it comes to receiving gifts. It is a Christian skill that requires humility, for my pride said "she needs this more than I do . . . what could she have that I need?" It requires putting aside my refusal to need—my insistence on being self-sufficient and "earning" what I get. And it requires generosity, to give the other person the opportunity to exercise her own virtue and generosity. We are surrounded by widows with a little flour, a little oil, two copper coins, a 15 page magazine. And it's just possible that our lives and theirs depend on our ability to receive them.