

8 November 2009
Pentecost 23

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Worldly Widows, Heavenly Brides”

Text: Luke 12:38-44 (1 Kings 17:8-16; Hebrews 9:24-28)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus sat down and watched. Always be careful when Jesus sits down to watch! He sees things that we cannot see. He sees things that we don't want to see. So when Jesus sits down to watch, you know a powerful teaching is coming our way.

And so it is this day, as Jesus sits in the Temple, opposite the treasury, and watches people drop in their offerings. It is quite a remarkable scene, for three reasons:

First, it is remarkable that Jesus can watch this at all, for this giving used to be done in secret, not in public. That it has now been made a spectacle, for people to come and be seen, is a signal that something has gone wrong.

Second, it is remarkable that a poor widow is putting money into the treasury, for this money was not meant for the upkeep of the Temple or that sort of thing, but as alms for taking care of the poor - like this widow! The fact that *she* is contributing is a signal that something has gone wrong.

And third, it is remarkable because the day on which Jesus does this is the Tuesday of Holy Week. Just two days ago He entered Jerusalem on a donkey to the shouts of Hosanna, and in just two days will be the Lord's Supper; in just two days His arrest; and in three days, His crucifixion. Yet He chooses to sit and watch. To sit and watch the offerings.

But in three days, who will sit and watch *His* offering? His offering, which He gives to help the poor - us poor, miserable, wretched sinners. His offering, when not with copper or gold or silver does He fill the treasury of the Lord, but when *His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death* fills that coffer? His offering, when He gives all that He is and all that He has. Who will be watching His offering? Not the Scribes and Pharisees - once they got Jesus on the cross, their work was done. They had more important things to do now. Not the disciples, they all - but John - ran away in fear. But you know who *will* be there? A widow, named Mary. A sword piercing her heart in sorrow.

The Son of God on the cross - a signal that something has gone wrong. That our sin has made us very horribly wrong.

That all makes this little event much more than a stewardship sermon. *Much more.* For if I stood up here and just told you to give more, to give like this widow who gave all she had, and even gave you lots of pious sounding reasons to do so, all I would be doing is making Scribes and Pharisees out of you. For while you might, in fact, give more, you would be doing so for the wrong reasons. And while you might not strut around like a Scribal peacock, in your heart you would be most pleased with yourself for answering the call, for going above and beyond the call of duty, for being a good Christian. And when you are pleased with yourself before God - whether it is for what you give, or for your good works, or whatever else you think you are doing for God - that is a mighty dangerous place to be. A very wrong place to be.

For the point of this story is not that you are to be *like* this poor widow, but to realize that you *are* a poor widow. For notwithstanding whatever you have in this world, be it little or much, spiritually you are a poor widow. For your sin has made it so. The perfect marriage of God and man in the Garden was killed by sin - each sin, evidence of your rebellion; each sin, estranging you from God; each sin, your testimony that God is not trustworthy, not good, not the provider of what you need. And so you sin to get what you think you want, but your sin leaves you empty. Momentary riches and fleeting pleasures is all sin leaves you with. And when your sinful lover satan is done taking from you and using you, he leaves you for another, leaving you a poor widow.

Such is the way of the world and of our sin, and loveless widowhood our eternal reward were it not for the One sitting there that day, watching the offerings. The One who came to be the Bridegroom for us poor widows; to give Himself for us widows as an offering for our sin on the cross; to wash us clean and make us pure, virgin brides again. What a wonderful thing to learn of such love, but even more wonderful to learn that this love is from the God we spurn in sin. Though we have left Him, He has not left us, but has come to us, chased after us, and lays down His life for us. That we might be His again.

Yet as wonderful as this love is, it can also be troubling, can't it? Because we can't understand it. Why would God do such a thing? Why would Jesus love me? So we look for something lovable in us; something, *anything*; some good work, some difference, some reason . . . but there's nothing. And so you may think: it's not for me; it can't be for me; I'm just a poor, dirty, unworthy, used up, sinful widow.

But remember the Temple treasury the widow put her coins into? Those offerings were meant to care for her, not take from her. And so it is with the true, heavenly

Temple treasury, which Jesus filled with *His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death*. **It is for you.** For you who have nothing. For you who are widows. For you who need the washing of forgiveness. Jesus did not come because you deserved it, but because He never stopped loving you, His bride. His love is the reason He came, which is why we can't understand it. It is not of this world. And yet it is true, and real. As true and real as His resurrection. As true and real as His body and blood given here for you today. That you may be His own.

And so while you may not have a seat of honor at the feasts of this world, you have a place at this feast, which will never run out. Like the widow of Zarephath and Elijah, each time you come back, the feast is here for you. To feast of the Word of your Lord. To feast on His forgiveness. To feast on His body and blood. To feast in His love. Until we move from this table to the next, to the heavenly banquet table, and the feast that has no end.

Now, the world cannot see all that in this Supper - it sees just a poor banquet not worth much at all. But as Jesus sat in the Temple that day, He saw what the world could not see. For while the world saw a poor widow, putting into the treasury nothing that would make a difference, Jesus saw His Bride putting in all she had. And putting in all she had not because she had to, but because she could. Not to win God's love, but because it was already hers. And so she shows who she is, and loves with the love that has been given to her. And in the midst of all those who gave out of their abundance, she shows herself to be the richest one of all. A Bride of Christ.

And the same is true for you. You may be someone in this world or no one. You may be rich or poor. You may be loved or despised. You may be useful or useless. But Jesus sees in you what the world cannot see: His Bride. And so for you He has come. For you He has seated His body and blood on this altar. To give you what you do not have, cleanse you, and betroth you to Himself once again. That each time His holy body is placed into your mouth and His holy blood is poured over your lips, you hear His loving, self-sacrificing "I do." *I do* love you. *I do* forgive you. *I do* take you. Each time, every time. His love, His feast, His forgiveness never running out.

And you know what? That makes you, in the midst of this world of abundance, the richest ones of all. Rich in faith. Rich in hope. Rich in faith. To give as you have been given to, and to live not in fear, but to be who you are: no longer a widow, but a dearly loved Bride. Now and forever.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.