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“The Faith of Widows and Brides”

Text: Mark 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.

Just about a month ago, as we gathered here in this place to receive our Lord’s gifts, we heard the story of a rich man who came up to Jesus and asked Him: *Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?* And after some conversation, ultimately the answer Jesus gave him was this: *You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me* (Mark 10:17-22). But the rich man could not do it. He could not let go of his wealth to follow Jesus. It was the one thing he could not let go of. He was willing to do anything and *everything* . . . except that. And we considered that day: what is the one thing *we* have? The one thing we cannot let go of?

Well today we heard a story - two stories, actually - that are the exact opposite of that one. The stories of two people who did let go of everything they had. And they weren’t rich folks, they were . . . very poor widows. The first was of a widow and her son who lived in the city of Zarephath during a time of severe famine. All she had left was enough food for her and her son for one more meal, and then, she expected, they would starve to death. So she goes out to gather the firewood to cook their last supper, when a prophet from Israel comes and asks for her food. But he does so with a promise: *the Lord God of Israel will give you daily bread everyday. He will take care of you and provide for you. He will do for you what no one else can or will.* And without any evidence to support this claim, and with this claim coming from a prophet who is in need of food himself, this widow does it. She gives all that she has. She clings to the promise of God, and God keeps His Word.

Then we heard the story of the second widow, this time in Jerusalem, at the Temple. Now the Temple at that time had 13 metal tubes - called trumpets because that’s what they were shaped like, wide at the opening and then narrowing down - for people to throw in their offerings. And since they were metal, you could hear the coins going in and clamoring down the tube. So when the rich came by and put their offering in, all their coins made a lot of noise, announcing to everyone in the area how generous that person had been. But Jesus does not praise them. Instead, He says *beware* of those who like to make a show of their piety and want the admiration of men. And then He praises a poor widow. A poor widow whose two tiny copper coins probably barely made a sound before men, but were like a clanging gong before God. For she put in all she had, *everything she had to live on*. But actually, if you translate the Greek very literally there, it’s ever greater than that. It says: *she put in her whole life*.

What that rich man could not do, these two widows did. And I don't think it was any easier simply because they were poor. And, quite frankly, they put us to shame. But not because we don't give everything we have - as I said a month ago, so I say today - this is not a command from God to us. You don't have to empty your wallet or your checking account into the offering plate today! You *can*, you're *free to*, but you don't have to to please God. This story's really not about money - it's about faith. For in doing what they did, these two widows showed *a faith* that is rarely seen. A faith that God really will provide all that we need.

And that's remarkable because judging by what could be seen, it certainly didn't appear that way. Both women were widows, deprived of their husbands. Both had become staggeringly poor. It didn't seem as if God was taking care of them at all. And yet both believe; both give all they have, all their life.

Does that describe your faith? I know it doesn't describe mine! How quickly we tend to doubt and struggle and disbelieve when things start going south, when trials and troubles and difficulties come. How quick we can be to grumble and complain when life isn't going as we want. How quick we can be to accuse God (if not in our words then in our thoughts) of not coming through for us, of not caring, and renegeing on His promises.

So the faith of these widows? Yeah, it puts me to shame. **But even better if it drives me to repent.**

For how will I get the faith of these widows? How can I be like them? By forcing myself to give more? No. For if the giving is not from a willing heart, it will only breed resentment. Or it can lead to the spiritual pride of the scribes, who thought God owed them something for what they did.

So what about trying harder? If you want to get better at math, you work hard at it and do your homework. If you want to get in better shape, you exercise. So too with faith? No again. You can't make yourself believe more. Faith is a gift, and the building of that faith and the strengthening of that faith is gift too. The gift of the Holy Spirit, working through His Word and Sacraments.

So it starts with repenting. Confessing that my faith is not what it should be, and so my thoughts and word and deeds and desires aren't either. And so repenting and then **hearing** how God really did keep His promises - to Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and all the people we hear of in the Bible, including these two widows; repenting and **remembering** the same promises God made to you in your baptism; repenting and **hearing again** the promise of God and the reality that your sins are forgiven; repenting and **receiving** the Body and Blood of Jesus that won that forgiveness for you on the cross and is now being given to you to eat and to drink - these are things

things of faith, that build and strengthen faith, that we might be like these two widows. For all this is not what we do, but what God does. For you. Gifts from Him, for you.

And with that as our focus - not how much we have to give, but how much we need to repent of; and not how much we do, but how much God has done, and is still doing, for us - with that as our focus, **God will make widows out of us yet**. And not just in faith, but also from a world that increasingly no longer cares much for us and what we believe, and has issued the church a certificate of divorce from the public square. And as that happens more and more, we will more and more have to be widows relying on Christ alone.

And that's okay. *More than okay*, actually. For the Scriptures are filled with the truth that those who have nothing, those who are in the greatest need - widows and orphans - are the special object of God's care and concern. And by faith, it is those who have a bridegroom who will never leave them as widows. For He can no longer die. He did, once, on the cross, but then He rose from the dead, defeating death and the grave. And so, in Jesus, we have a forever bridegroom, who as we sang *will soon call us to the wedding feast* (LSB #514). And not clinging to the things of this world, widowed from the life of this world, we will rejoice in that call. For that day will be like the weddings we see so often here - the joy of bride and groom being united as one. But it will be even better - for on the Last Day, when that call will take place, there will be no more "til death us do part," for death will lay defeated at our Saviour Jesus' feet. And it will, therefore, be a feast forever.

That's what makes the story of these two widows perfect for the end of the church year, which we're now in; this being the third-last Sunday in the church year. At this time we focus on the end times, the Last Day, when Jesus will come again, as He promised. When He will come again, as the reading from Hebrews said, ***not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him***. Who are waiting for their bridegroom to come.

For that's what widows do. That widow in the Temple that day is surely an example of faith to us. But even greater is the One who sat in the Temple that day, saw what she did, and commended her faith. For in just about 72 hours, He would be the one giving everything He had, His whole life, for your life, and for the life of the world. In just about 72 hours, He would be on the cross, and it would not be gold or silver, but His holy, precious blood that would be pouring into the heavenly treasury for the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus filled that treasury, so there is nothing more we can give or put into it. Jesus filled it, and we receive from it, as He fills us with Himself, His love, His mercy, His forgiveness. And says: *I am coming soon*.

So with all that - His treasure, His promise, His life - what's in your hand? What are you holding onto? A handful of flour? Two small copper coins? Really? **Is not hanging on making you poor, and letting go making you rich?**

So instead, come now to the feast, and don't hang on, but receive. Come now to the feast, where your bridegroom is even now for you. Come and receive from Him a treasure greater than any other. Come and be filled with Him. Be a widow to the world and the betrothed of Christ. And rejoice in your bridegroom, who is coming soon. For you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.