

Lenten Luncheon Reflections

Tuesday, February 26, 2008

Jesus Affirms the Actions of Two Women

Opening Hymn: “Amazing Grace” (*stanzas 1 and 2*)

Prayer:

Gracious God, we praise you for all of the different ways in which we have become aware of your amazing grace at work in each of our lives. We thank you that you enable us to sing of that grace, and also give us the privilege to share that grace with others, and to show forth by our words and our deeds each day what that amazing grace means to us. As we thank you for this meal, for all who have prepared it for us, and for the privilege of sharing it together so we would pray for your guidance that we may respond to your amazing grace in ways that are pleasing to you each and every day, for we ask these things in the name of Jesus through whom we have seen most clearly your amazing grace revealed. Amen.

Some of you are probably far more familiar than I am with some of the speeches of Governor Mike Huckabee as he continues to seek the Republican Party nomination for President of the United States of America. I was interested recently, though, to hear part of a report on Public Radio in which the reporters were talking about how so many of his speeches, as a Baptist minister, usually contained quotes from the Bible, or allusions to parts of the Biblical narrative. In order to try to determine how many people recognized and understood what he was saying they went out to do some on the street interviews. The particular reference about which I heard some interviewers asking people was to the widow’s mite. People were asked what he meant when he spoke of a mite. Most claimed

ignorance. One woman said she thought it was some small biting insect. No one as far as I am aware was able either to say exactly what a mite might be or to identify the story from which he may have taken the reference.

I am sure that if any of you had been amongst those being interviewed you would not have had that same problem. I will admit, though, that after hearing those interviews I did go back and check it out. I am now so familiar with reading the story in the New Revised Standard Version which speaks of her giving “two small copper coins worth about a penny,” that I had to go back to check whether in fact the word mite is used in this story. Those of you who are familiar with the King James Version of the Bible will recall that there it says of the poor widow she threw in “two mites, which make a farthing.” (Mark 12:42) It is this same word mite that we find in the words of the familiar hymn of Frances Ridley Havergal, on which our anthem was based Sunday a week ago. In this hymn he says, “Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold.”

Whether or not we would have been able correctly to identify that story if interviewed on the street about Governor Mike Huckabee’s use of it in his speeches, I wonder how many of us have read that familiar story in its wider context. Right before his affirmation of this widow we read that Jesus was teaching in the temple and saying, (Mark 12:38-40) "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, [39] and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! [40] They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

One of the things for which Jesus condemns the scribes is for the fact that they devour widows’ houses. What this probably means is that the scribes as the literate class working for the wealthy they would have written the loan agreements between the wealthy who had money to lend to poor widows. When the loan for

whatever reason could not be repaid they would then foreclose on the widows' property. We are not told whether the poor widow with her two mites had suffered at the hands of the scribes in this way, but clearly Jesus recognized it as a common practice of his day. The scribes are condemned for acting in this way because throughout the whole of the Old Testament widows, along with orphans, are seen as special objects of God's compassion, for without a man to provide for them, they were most vulnerable people. Throughout the Old Testament the way in which the widows and the orphans are treated is seen to be the measure of whether justice or injustice rules in the community. By the time of Jesus the temple and the different ways in which it was being used of which we saw he was so critical last week had become a place that supported the wealthy in these ways of treating the widows and the other poor people of the land because all records of debts were stored in the temple. In this way the temple itself was being used to encourage the way in which the scribes and the rich people of Jesus day were treating the widows and other poor people like them.

In the familiar story we are not told whether the widow had become poor because of the action of the scribes in devouring widows' houses. Clearly, though, her actions are seen in contrast to those of the rich. We read (Mark 12:41-44) that while still teaching in the temple Jesus [41] sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. [42] A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. [43] Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. [44] For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

This story traditionally is seen as contrasting the deep devotion of the poor widow with the public display of generosity by the wealthy. As such she is often

lifted up, especially at stewardship time, as being the positive image of what it means to follow Jesus because she gave all she had. Some scholars suggest, though, that another way of looking at this passage is to hear it as condemnation of the way in which those in authority in the temple manipulated the poor to give all that they had to support the temple. The condemnation is not of the widow but of the system which exploits the poor and leads her to act in this way. Either way the passage is understood, the widow and her action are affirmed and the wealthy are condemned.

If the widow did feel obligated and manipulated into giving of all she had in this way to support the temple the other story to which we turn our attention this week appears to have no sense of obligation and responsibility about it. While no motive is given it is clear that her action is entirely voluntary and not what the wealthy of her day would have anticipated or expected. As we turn to this story we find, as we did last week, that Mark once again sets this story in the midst of another story which serve as its bookends. In Mark 14:1-2 we read: It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; [2] for they said, "Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people."

The scene is the increasing conflict between Jesus and the chief priests and the scribes. This conflict was no doubt intensified as Jesus the day after "cleansing" the temple had spoken such words of condemnation of the scribes such as we have just heard in the temple courts themselves. Despite their desire to get rid of Jesus for all of their power they are still afraid of the reaction of the people who were still his supporters.

It is in the midst of this report of increasing conflict that Mark places the following story: (Mark 14:3-9): [3] While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very

costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. [4] But some were there who said to one another in anger, "Why was the ointment wasted in this way? [5] For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they scolded her. [6] But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. [7] For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. [8] She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. [9] Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

Although both of these women and their actions are affirmed by Jesus, the contrast between the two of them is very clear. In this story the woman has this alabaster jar of ointment which those who challenge the way she chose to use it say could have been sold for three hundred denarii. A denarius was the average daily wage of a day laborer so here in this jar she has an ointment worth almost a year's wages of a daily laborer. This clearly was no cheap ointment or perfume. It was very likely imported from India where it was collected from the nard plant. Nard was used to perfume the head and hair and to anoint the dead. The dramatic description of her breaking the jar invites us as readers not simply to see and hear what is going on but to smell it as well.

The condemnation of her action that follows is interesting. She is not condemned for her selfishness in using this expensive perfume on herself. It is her use of it on Jesus when it could have been sold and the money given to the poor that is seen as a waste. The affirmation that Jesus gives to her action stands in contrast to the negative reaction of those who were eating supper with him when this all takes place. Jesus makes an interesting comment when he says, "She has done what she could, she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial." We

cannot say how much this was really her motive, but certainly if it was, her action stands in tremendous contrast to that of the disciples of Jesus. Jesus has warned them over and over that he had to go to Jerusalem and to die, but they seem unable to understand what he was saying to them. This woman on the other hand appears to be hearing what he is saying and drew the obvious conclusion, namely, that since Jesus was going to die and rise she must anoint him now beforehand, because she will never have a chance to do it afterwards. Looked at in this way she becomes the first true believer in the word of Jesus and, therefore, the first Christian. We do not know her name, but we know what she did and how Jesus affirmed her action.

In the light of her action of self-giving in loving concern for Jesus in the conclusion of the story we see a tremendous contrast when we read (Mark 14:10-11) [10] Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. [11] When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

Once again we are not given any motive for the action this time of Judas, but clearly his act of treachery stands in tremendous contrast with the loving, selfless giving expressed by this woman who in turn is commended and affirmed by Jesus. The action of Judas prepares for the events which will follow in the next few days of Holy Week which we will consider over the next few weeks.

The contrast of the reaction to Jesus from the chief priests and the scribes and from Judas, and then from this woman prompts us to think how we would have reacted to Jesus if we had been there. Even more, of course, it prompts us to think and ponder how we still today react to Jesus and to all of the love of God he has shown for us as he comes to assure us not only of God's amazing grace, but also of the promises of God on which we can firmly stand. Let us remember what it is to

stand on those promises of God as we sing stanzas 1 and 2 and the refrain of the hymn, “Standing on the Promises of God,” found at No. 39 in our booklet of favorite hymns.

Hymn: “Standing On the Promises of God” *(stanzas 1 and 2 and refrains)*

Prayer:

Gracious God, we thank you for the way in which the negative and the positive responses to your love seen in Jesus Christ prompt us to think about our own response to that amazing grace and to that great love you have shown for us in him. May all of our response in word and in deed this day and every day be pleasing to you and worthy of the affirmation of Jesus, for we ask these things in his name and for his sake. Amen.

Much of the material for this presentation was drawn from the book, “The Last Week,” by Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan. HarperCollins, 2006.