

Stewardship Sunday  
November 8, 2015

**"GOD'S SUBVERSIVES"**

By Mary Anne Biggs

Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17  
Mark 12:38-44

One of my seminary professors once told us there are two topics we should always avoid in polite conversation ... and in the pulpit ... if we want to keep our jobs: religion and politics. He was just joking ... I think. But religion and politics are explosive subjects because they address our deepest values and our deepest identity as human beings in community. Yes, both religion and politics are explosive subjects, but especially explosive when they are brought together.

Some people think Christians should stay out of politics altogether. One extreme argues that religion is private and individual and that it is always exclusive and anti-democratic ... that it has caused more violence and heartache than any other force in human history, so it has no place whatsoever in a secular democracy. The other extreme argues that politics is too worldly ... that there is no way to be involved in the mudslinging turmoil of elections and lawmaking without compromising your values ... so the path to spiritual purity leads us away from temporal to eternal pursuits. But I want to stand in the radical middle. I believe religion is never merely private nor individual. And faith demands we be involved in the processes that affect our community. It's as old as the Bible itself ... good religion makes good politics and bad religion makes bad politics. The state is always trying to attach the name of God to its policies ... to manipulate people by claiming divine authorization for themselves while demonizing their political opponents. But we should never mistake the machinery of the temporal ... and therefore temporary state ... with the sovereign and ultimate rule of God. As citizens of a democracy we should be involved in politics, but our most important political act is to live by the values of our faith.

What I want to observe today is that being religious is in and of itself a radical and subversive political act. Today we heard the story of three widows. Widows have a prominent place in our Christian scripture. In ancient society, in a time when there was no social safety net, widows were among the most vulnerable of all citizens. And because the Bible over and over again says that God sides with the least of these ... the poor, the sick, the estranged, the despised and rejected ... it should not surprise us to hear that we are responsible before God to care for widows and orphans. The Mosaic law says, *"You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans"* (Ex 22:22-24). And in the New Testament James declares: *"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world"* (1:27). The prophets over and over again declare God's

judgment against the nation for economic policies which abuse the helpless. Isaiah, for instance, says:

*Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away? To whom will you flee for help, and where will you leave your wealth, so as not to crouch among the prisoners or fall among the slain? For all this (God's) anger has not turned away; (God's) hand is stretched out still. (Isa 10:1-4)*

Which makes me wonder what the prophet would say about the bankers who have victimized the vulnerable with their pyramid investment schemes, or for that matter, the televangelists who depend upon the donations of the most vulnerable who can attend no other worship but those that come over the television.

But the Bible goes even further in telling stories of widows, abandoned and forgotten by the powers, who played a major role in the work of God that mattered. Consider again the widows in our Bible readings today. These widows might seem utterly powerless, but God works through them to accomplish the Divine work of eternal value. As Margaret Rose puts it:

*Again and again, the biblical witness proclaims that God's people have no tribal boundaries, do not have to be alike to belong to each other. Again and again, the lives of our forebears in the faith are blessed when they reach out beyond themselves to include rather than exclude. Again and again, Jesus proclaims the good news that love is the criteria for belonging and not blood.*

I am warning you right here and now that I cannot resist the temptation to make this a sermon about tithing and stewardship, after all this is Stewardship Sunday. And the widow in Mark's gospel is truly God's visual aid for stewardship. But the widow in this story is not just tithing. She gives up everything she has to participate in a system which she trusts ... that promises to take care of her. Jesus compares her to the priests and rulers who are wealthy ... who love the spotlight ... who tip God for public credit. And no doubt Jesus' disciples, just a bunch of good ole country boys from the outback of Galilee, are impressed by their show of wealth and power. But this widow ... who is powerless and ignored by the mainstream ... is the real model of God's power. She invests herself entirely in the Divine alternative. And Jesus, who will do the same, is impressed by her.

Her motives are pure. She clearly gives out of a genuine heart for God. Although her gift is meager in comparison to the large sums given by the wealthy, it is by far the greater gift, because it comes from her heart. I want to suggest that the place to begin in our giving is to examine our hearts. Do we desire to give God the very best that we have ... from all that we have?

Several years ago, Mark Behle, our missionary in Lesotho came to the church in Nekoosa. I know that he came to this church as well because Eagle River was his next stop. Much of what he said impressed me, but nothing more than his description of the time of offering at his African

church. He described how his fellow church members would sometimes dance down the aisles during the offering. They didn't have much to give, but what they did have they gave with much joy. They realized that it was a privilege to give back to God. As God has given so much to us, especially in and through his son Jesus Christ, surely we can give back to God from glad and joyful hearts!

Something else is at work in this widow. For her to give such an extravagant gift, she must be giving from a grateful spirit. Her gratitude is unspoken, but it is clearly her motivation in giving. Why else would one give so much from the little she had?

Dr. Michael McCullough is a psychologist and the editor of the book *The Psychology of Gratitude*. In a recent interview on public radio, McCullough says that the scientific research reveals what many of us have been taught by our grandmothers all along ... taking time daily to be grateful for the blessings in our lives ... leads to a higher degree of satisfaction and sense of well-being. McCullough says: *"Your grandmother was right. When people are encouraged to take a few moments, every day, even as little time as two or three minutes a day, to simply appreciate a few positive things that typically somebody else did for us, you end up feeling better at the end of the day about your life in general. We see boosts in positive emotion (he says). We see reductions in negative emotion. People are more satisfied with their lives as a whole....They even sleep better at night! They are more prone to spiritual pursuits."*

I always love it when the scientific research backs up what the Bible has said all along. The Psalmist says it in Psalm 100: "Enter God's gates with thanksgiving!" The Apostle Paul says it: "Give thanks in all things." (I Thess. 5:18). A grateful heart is a foundation of an emotionally and spiritually healthy life. We would all do well to take time each and every day to count our many blessings.

You can bet that the widow in this story has a grateful spirit for God's blessings in her life. Jesus affirms her because she is giving for all the right reasons ... a genuine heart for God and a grateful spirit.

And there's one more thing going on. The woman's genuine heart for God and grateful spirit motivate her to give with a generous attitude.

Her gift is clearly the most generous of all ... not in the amount of the gift but in the sacrifice behind it. Jesus says, "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."

How invested are you in the work of God in the world? I'm not just talking about money, though we might begin there. But your energy ... your time ... your attention ... your passion ... how much are you invested in the principalities and powers of popular culture and how much in the eternal values of Christ? Of course, your return on investment will be related to where you invest most ... so I only want you to ask yourself ... which one offers the greatest lasting reward?

And this is why I suggest to you that religion is the ultimate political act. As Christians we are called to be God's subversives in the world. You know the chapter and verse of the principalities and powers ... including our culture, our nation, and both political parties. What matters most is wealth, youth, appearance, power, dominance, control, fame, competition, trash-talking insults, putting down your enemies, being the biggest, military might, corporate hierarchy, individual independence, status, and self. But here we are creating a community with a counter-testimony that says what matters most is love, sacrifice, service, self-forgetfulness, taking care of the least of these, seeing the beauty of the small and fragile, welcoming the stranger, taking care of each other, forgiveness, cooperation, encouragement, loving our enemies, peace ... the way of Christ. And when you invest in that subversive, counter-cultural way of living ... when you put your two cents into creating that alternative community ... you are making a lasting and effective political statement like no other. Like these widows ... ignored by the world in their time because they don't really matter ... we don't have to be noisy about it. We just have to choose it over the world's values. We just have to live it. We have all been enriched by the Stewardship Moments offered by our brothers and sisters in Christ in the last several weeks. They bet their lives that living by the scripture is the best bet ... that it pays eternal dividends. They join me in encouraging you to make the same wager, and trust in the fact that God will bring about the lasting result.

Last week we participated in the small, unassuming supper our ruler instituted long ago that lies at the heart of our community life ... Communion. The word says a lot concerning what we're about, doesn't it? It is his gift to us. It represents how Jesus put everything he had into loving us and creating this alternative ... subversive community. I invite you today to consider his gift, but also to understand the call that the table makes to you and me ... the model it wants us to follow. Because when we join this table ... we are not just receiving grace ... we are giving ourselves to someone and submitting to his sovereignty and declaring his way in the world. You and I may never be included in the tables of power, but this is the real table of power ... and you are included ... where you are always welcome. Oh, I know the world wouldn't see this as a political statement or an act of power. The first supper only included a Galilean carpenter and twelve good ole country boys from the outback. But they turned the world upside down. And don't you think the world needs to be turned upside down again? May we pray?

Lord, We accept the gift of your grace. May we also hear the call of your sacrifice to be and build the body of Christ in this place and time. Amen.