

9th Sunday after Pentecost - July 21, 2024

1 Thessalonians 5:12–24; Mark 12:41–44

“In all things give thanks”

1. The gospel story of the widow making her offering reminds me of a worship service I attended in Kenya twenty-five years ago (some of you may recall this story)
 - a. My presbytery in Illinois had a sister-presbytery relationship with a presbytery in central Kenya
 - i. Some churches in Illinois, including First Presbyterian in St. Anne, where I was pastor at the time, established a long-distance relationship with a church in a large town called Isiolo
 - ii. A delegation from Illinois traveled to Kenya so we could get to know each other better, and learn from each other.
 - iii. I had the privilege of meeting members of our partner church, the Good Shepherd church in Isiolo, and I got a chance to preach and co-officiate communion with the church pastor, George Muthamia. (He is still my dear friend and brother, and we prayed recently for his daughter’s health following a traffic accident in Nairobi)
 - iv. That January Sunday morning a quarter century ago, the church was already getting pretty warm
 1. We were so close to the equator and in a fairly arid part of the country
 2. The church, a simple stone building with a concrete floor, was full almost to capacity, maybe 200 people sitting on simple wooden benches
 - b. After I preached (with an interpreter standing next to me simultaneously translating to Swahili) the time came for the offering
 - i. At this church their tradition wasn’t to pass a plate for the offering.
 - ii. As the choir and the congregation sang, the members of the church walked down the center aisle to place their offering in two large red velvet bags on the communion table at the front of the sanctuary
 - iii. People were singing, clapping, some even dancing as they walked to place their offering
 - iv. I clapped along with them, taking it all in
 - v. One person in particular caught my eye
 - vi. I was sitting up front, facing the congregation. To my left very near the front sat an older woman, quite elderly, who during the offertory, slowly walked across the front of the church and placed her offering on the communion table. It was a head of cabbage.
 - vii. It made me smile. I could see that she was a person of humble means, and here she was presenting to God produce from her garden. What a blessing
 - c. When the offertory and singing ended, a leader of the church went straight to the communion table and picked up that head of cabbage and started addressing the congregation

- i. I don't speak Swahili but after a few minutes I figured out what was happening
 - ii. He was auctioning the cabbage, right there in the middle of worship!
 - iii. There was a little bit of back and forth, and then from the congregation came a well-dressed man who went right up to our "auctioneer"
 - iv. Taking the cabbage from the auctioneer and placing some money in the offering bag, he then did something I had not anticipated
 - v. He didn't return to his seat right away, but instead walked over to the older woman who had first donated this very cabbage, and gave it back to her
 - d. It was so moving to see.
 - i. I imagine the woman may have been a widow
 - ii. Her offering was a heartfelt gift to God, a blessing
 - iii. And the congregation knew that it needed to do its part to bless her also, first by seeing her, and also by ensuring her wellbeing
- 2. Having experienced this moment, I now picture the passage we read from Mark with that Kenyan widow in my mind's eye
 - a. It is this dear woman who walks up to where the offering was being collected at the temple
 - b. It is this dear woman whom Jesus saw, and whom he knew was giving from the bottom of her purse, giving basically the last two coins she had
 - c. The noisy procession of all the other people putting larger amounts of money in the offering wasn't what Jesus was focused on. He focused on her
 - d. And he makes her seen, he makes sure the disciples notice her and her faith.
 - e. Where the Mark story stops, my Kenyan worship experience fills in a crucial missing detail, because I can just hear Jesus say to the disciples, as they saw this widow place her last two coins:
 - i. "Truly I tell you all, this poor widow has put in more than all those giving to the treasury. For all of them out of their abundance have given but she out of her lack has put in everything she had, her whole livelihood."
 - ii. Now you go, give her two pennies, and bring her to dinner tonight.
- 3. We may, unintentionally, see biblical stories like this one in a compete vacuum.
 - a. It's the widow. It's the disciples. It's Jesus.
 - b. But open the lens wider and we become aware of the political and community contexts in which these stories takes place.
 - i. The land of Palestine were Jesus lived was under a brutal military occupation – only look at the Roman guards all around.
 - ii. The Jewish religious authorities in charge of the Jerusalem temple had struck a hard-fought accommodation which allowed the temple to remain the place of worship to God, not the Romain deities – this was the only exception in all of the Roman Empire and the temple authorities would fight to keep it so.
 - iii. The letter to the Thessalonians, which Katie read, was written in the context also of the Roman Empire, of a church at its infancy in northern Greece

trying to get its footing in a social context that viewed it with suspicion or outright hostility.

- c. These biblical stories took place in contexts full of political struggle, often violent
- d. I think about Kenya in 1999, when I was in that church worship service.
 - i. It was a country grappling with massive social injustice and corruption, with political uncertainty about its future, with violence among factions and tribes.
 - ii. All that was documented in the daily papers, with news and intrigue swirling around in the hot arid air of Isiolo Kenya, even as inside a small stone church that one widow placed her offering of a head of cabbage on the communion table, and then she received back her cabbage as a sign of love and care.
 - iii. The work of justice can't wait for an opportune time. The work of mercy doesn't wait for a time of tranquility.
4. We too are in the midst of our own challenges and headwinds as a nation.
 - a. News outlets document, analyze, even hype the headlines.
 - b. There is violence exacerbated by injustice, and easy access to weapons of war,
 - c. A few years ago a violent mob in DC called for the hanging of then Vice President Pence, and now we had an attempted assassination of former president Trump on the campaign trail.
 - d. That rightly shocks us, but it is similar to attempted assassinations within the past couple of years of sitting heads of state in Slovakia, Japan, Ukraine
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_heads_of_state_and_government_who_survived_assassination_attempts
 - e. And still the Gospel calls us to peacemaking, to mercy, to community.
 - f. Not divorced from our harsh reality, but facing it to confront it, to heal it.
 - i. That is the power of the Gospel message of Jesus, a message, by the way, which some will attempt to hijack in favor of a political ideology, corrupting the justice-focused, barrier-breaking message of Jesus and instead taming it into a subservient foot soldier of Christian Nationalism.
 - ii. Jesus himself battled some who would twist his message to their purposes.
5. Friends, the headwinds we encounter today aren't new.
 - a. They feel stronger maybe, and there may be debris flying all around us, but we've been here before.
 - b. And then and now, we've been called by God to peacemaking, to justice, to mercy, to community.
 - i. To the widow with the two pennies in the offering plate, or to the widow with the cabbage, or to the unhoused neighbor longing for water in a drinking glass, or last week at our Faith in Action Sunday to the faithful church members who needed a wheelchair ramp fixed or yard work done, or to the families who will gratefully rely on donated wood for heat next winter, or to the unnamed families we're seeking to support by writing letters advocating for a just and caring farm bill in congress.
6. And, in truly shocking form, then and now we're challenged to live our life of faith rejoicing and giving God thanks.
 - a. In the midst of worrisome and frightening circumstances.
 - b. In the front lines of resistance.

- c. In the quiet behind the scenes work of mercy.
- d. To rejoice. To give thanks. As we serve. As we pray.
- e. Not because it's calm outside, but because the God who calls us and equips us in the midst of this storm is the very God of nature, of all that is, in charge of and above all things, including this imperfect world of corrupting power and injustice, and also of daring and loving neighbors.