

PENT 23 2009 [PR 27] “Fears and Faith”
Mark 12:38-44

Most people try to be self-sufficient. They work to provide the needs of life and the needs of family. But there are circumstances that interfere with our making a living. So it was with the two women in our texts for today.

Drought was the cause of famine in the land when Elijah asked the widow at Zarephath to give him food. In Mark’s gospel the woman who gave her last two pennies was a widow. Life is like that. Drought, fire, flood, personal tragedy in the loss of a spouse, unemployment and economic downturns can destroy what we have built and wreak havoc on our best laid plans to be self sufficient. It is at times like these that we realize two things. First, that we are inter-dependent people. We are not totally SELF sufficient. Rather we are inter-dependent. We need other people in our lives to help in time of need.

One of my favorite illustrations of this comes from when we lived in Alaska where we met some “interesting” people. Statistics tell us that single men outnumber single women in Alaska two to one. So, many women are drawn to Alaska to find a husband and the saying goes, “The odds are good, but the goods are odd.” Alaska was a magnet to men who thought of themselves as “independent” and “self-sufficient”. They would come north and go out into the woods build a cabin and “live off the land”.

One such person we knew well. Roger lived alone in a 8X10 Sears tool shed. He had no electricity, no running water. For insulation he lined the walls of his tool shed with books. He had over 180 college credits but no degree. He found a job in town refurbishing airplane propellers and he was

saving his money to build a house. He was proud of his self-sufficient lifestyle and independence. Yet Roger dropped by our house after work two or three nights a week. He would take a shower, wash his clothes and watch TV. We would invite him to stay for supper and listen to him spin yarns of his self-sufficient and independent life. We loved Roger but you would have to say that he was not really self sufficient.

The truth is that we are inter-dependent people. [John Donne's Meditation XVII](#) says, "No man is an island". We live in a vastly complex system of social and economic interdependency. We call it community. We are dependent upon one another. When things go bad we rely on one another, friends, family and the community to help us work through tough times. We are "interdependent" people.

God Will Provide.

Second, if we are honest, we realize that all we have and call our own really comes to us from outside ourselves. Life itself is a gift. Good parents and a stable home are gifts. Being born in this country is a gift. All you have to do is take a trip overseas to realize how good we have it here in this country. The ability to learn is a gift. Health and strength to work is a gift. My father, who had no more than an 8th grade education, always prayed the same prayer in our family devotions as we grew up. It began, "Thank you God for work to do and the health to do it." We begin life with talents that are gifts from God. We expand those talents and gifts through education and opportunity that we often take for granted or consider them our "due". Yet

the talent and the time we call our own is really a gift from God. The gifts of God stand behind all our accomplishments, all our achievements, all our successes. To think otherwise is to be both arrogant and ignorant. The only way to claim that you are a truly “self-made man or woman” is to have grown up as an orphan who taught yourself to read without a teacher, who paid for your own education apart from public schools and universities, who lived outside society with its roads and infrastructure that is provided by tax dollars. If this describes your life then you can legitimately claim to be a “self-made man or woman”. The reality is that we are interdependent people who use the many and varied gifts that God has given us which enable us to live, to work, and to succeed.

The hand of God gives and sustains the life of this world. As if nature itself was not enough to make us realize this God gives us his word to tell us just Who is behind all these incredible treasures. The Bible tells us that God provides. God provides for our earthly needs and God provides for our eternal salvation in Jesus. The Bible calls us to trust in what God can, will and does provide.

The gospel lesson tells the story of a poor widow who gave her last penny as an offering to God. She was as good as dead. She had no more options. All she had left was a couple of pennies – worthless. Hope against hope she went to the temple and gave her problem to God in the form of an offering of all she had left, a couple of pennies. It was like saying “God, I’m dead. Only you can help me now.” And God saw her and heard her prayer. Jesus was right there and he listened to her prayer. **“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 treasure. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had to live on.” Her action illustrated her trust in God. Faith clings to God and the promise of God to provide.

The texts for today in the O.T. lesson and Gospel lesson teach us about **trust** and **risk**, **wants** and **needs**, **greed** and **gratitude**, **faith** and **fear**, **public posturing** and **secret sacrifice**.

We learn about **trust and risk**. The woman who shared her last bit of food with the prophet Elijah ran the risk of not having enough food for herself and her child. Yet she trusted in the word of God through the prophet Elijah. As we trust in God to provide our needs we are willing to risk giving. Trust in God enables us to let go of our treasure for we realize that our life is secure in the hands of God.

Few people say at their death bed, “I wish I had been more cautious” except perhaps for the truly reckless. There is a balance in life between being overly cautious and overly careless. Taking careless risks diminishes the value of life. But overly risk-averse, non-exposure to any risk diminishes the purpose of life.

Today’s text also teaches us about **wants and needs**. The woman who gave her last penny as an offering to God knew that her need to give thanks to God outweighed her wants in life. As we trust in God to provide our needs then our wants take on a different priority. We discover that our needs are met by God and our wants become less important. What we “want” is never

satisfied. We have an insatiable appetite for more thinking that accumulation will lead to joy and satisfaction in life. Anyone who has lived very long discovers that the accumulation of “things” is a shabby substitute for meaningful relationships, love, friends, family and the like.

We learn about **greed and gratitude** in these texts. Both women in today’s texts could have been greedy and clung desperately to what was their last morsel and last penny, afraid to let go. As we trust in God to provide, our greed is replaced with gratitude for the bountiful gifts of God. Our gratitude spurs us to exchange a “grasp and hold” mentality for an attitude shaped by generosity. The Bible says, **“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”** Acts 20:35 (Paul quoting Jesus. The gospels do not record this as a saying of Jesus.) Try tithing and you will discover this truth.

We learn about **fears and faith**. No doubt these women experienced fear as they faced their uncertain future. But their faith in God enabled them to face the future in confidence that God will provide. As we trust in God to provide, our fears about life and “having enough” are overcome by faith that God is true to his word and promises. That faith enables us to live without fear of tomorrow

The stories in today’s texts call us to a great and daring adventure. The adventure is trusting in God for life, in this world and in the world to come. Trust in God leads to gratitude and gratitude leads to the ability to let go of worldly security. **Helen Keller once said, “Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life**

is either a daring adventure or nothing.” (Helen Keller, The Open Door, 1957).

Jesus pointed to the faith and trust of the poor widow who gave her all trusting in God to provide for her life. Note well that right after Jesus points to this kind of faith in God, he also practices what he praises in the poor widow. Jesus also trusts in God as he went to the cross and gave his life for us. By his death Jesus gave you life.

As we trust in God to provide the needs of our life we learn it is God who stands behind all we have and call our own. And since we have received everything as a gift we discover that we do not need public acclaim for sharing our gifts with others. Giving becomes an act of worship and worship focuses its attention on God and not on ourselves.

In the last week you should have received a mailing from the church regarding our fall stewardship campaign. I hope you have taken time to look over those materials. We have designated the Sundays in November as “Commitment Sundays” when we return our pledge cards and time and talent sheets to the church. This is a way of indicating your support of the work of your church and its witness in this community in the year ahead.

Giving is an act of gratitude and it is done without fanfare or need of recognition or expectation of return for we know that what we offer is only a part of what God has first given us, our selves, our time, and our possessions, all signs of God’s gracious love. We offer them in gratitude for what God has given us for this life and what He has given us for the life to come in Jesus Christ, Our Lord.

Let us pray: Almighty God, all that we possess is from your loving hand. Give us grace that we may honor you with all we have and respond to your gifts by living thankful, generous and faithful lives. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.