



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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NOVEMBER 11, 2018
THE TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Lord of the Small
I Kings 17:8-16; Mark 12:38-44

Thank you for not groaning out loud upon hearing the story of “The Widow’s Mite.” I know you were thinking, “Oh, no! Not another stewardship sermon!” You were hoping that you had heard your last sermon on giving until next fall, weren’t you?

Well, exhale and fear not! This sermon is not about stewardship—certainly not the financial kind that seeks to open your wallet a little wider in order to meet the church’s financial needs. No, we don’t need to hear another stewardship sermon right now because we all know our responsibility to our shared ministry, don’t we?

No, this sermon is not about stewardship, but it is about widows—or at least what some of the widows in the Bible can teach us about living our faith. Jesus noticed a widow putting her “mite” into an offering box and pointed it out to his disciples. A widow of Zarephath and her son helped out the prophet Elijah and someone wrote about it in the book of I Kings. If these two stories were noteworthy enough to write down thousands of years ago, they might just hold some value for us today.

It was a commonly understood responsibility in the ancient Near East that widows and orphans were to be cared for. That kind of moral obligation made sense in a culture where women had few rights and opportunities and financial security was in the hands of fathers, husbands, and sons. Anyone who grew crops was supposed to leave some of the harvest behind for widows and orphans and strangers in the land to glean for themselves. The community as a whole was supposed to help take care of these folks who were most vulnerable.

Sadly, the most vulnerable people in the community were often overlooked and forgotten. In the story of Elijah, the widow of Zarephath and her son were preparing for their last meal because their food (a little meal and oil to cook it) were about to run out. For whatever reason, no one else was there to help out. Before Jesus pointed out the generosity of the widow who placed her two pennies in the treasury box, he condemned the behavior of the

scribes who expected to be honored in public and offered long and rambling prayers at community events. In private, however, they pressured people like widows who lived on the edge of life to give to the temple in ways they could not afford. The end result was that they often lost their homes supporting the religious institution that should have been caring for them.

The basic problem with the plight of widows and other people who existed on the fringes of society is that they held little value in the eyes of other people. As expected, God has always had something to say about the matter.

In ancient cultures, the primary responsibility to care for widows and everyone else fell to the king. The king had the authority, the resources, and (hopefully) the compassion to provide for citizens of his kingdom who were unable to provide for themselves. After all, it was believed that the king was an image of God, one who ruled by divine appointment and was, therefore, above everyone else. While the ruler was supposed to share the blessings of God with his subjects, it was not always the case. That was the prevailing view of most ancient societies, but not of the God as revealed in the Bible.¹

The Bible takes a different view of humanity. Rabbi Shai Held writes:

How profound is the Bible's commitment to a sense of shared humanity? Genesis 1 is like a hymn to biodiversity. The text tells us that God creates fruit-bearing trees "of every kind" and vegetation of "every kind"; God makes creeping creatures "of every kind" and winged birds "of every kind"; God creates animals "of every kind" and wild beasts "of every kind." By the time God creates Adam, the careful reader (or listener) expects to hear that God created human beings "of every kind"—and yet the refrain is missing. The earth-shattering implication is that there are no kinds of human beings.²

According to Rabbi Held, and the Bible, we are all kings and queens! We are ALL created in the image of God. There are no different kinds of humans so that one species is better or more valuable than another. We are all created the same—as children of God who bear God's image. That fact

¹Rabbi Shai Held, "We're All Royalty," *The Christian Century* (November 7, 2018), 12-13.

²Held, 12.

alone makes us pretty special, doesn't it? Yet, for some reason, we do not always live as if each of us is a child of God.

Sometimes we do our very best to divide humanity into as many "kinds" as we can. We sort ourselves by where we were born and where we live, by the language we speak and the customs we practice. Our economic fortune puts some of us over there, our education sends some of us in that direction, the color of our skin places us here. Our pedigrees and politics and peculiarities land us in this or that box. Our faith scatters us to all corners of the human household. I guarantee you that every one of us has said something like, "It takes all kinds to make the human race." And we generally do not mean that statement as a compliment. I daresay that had you or I or most people on the planet written the opening chapter of the Bible, we would have said, "And God created human beings of every kind" and then said it was good. Yet, that is not what the writer of the first chapter of the Bible said nor is it what the God who created us did, and it is certainly not how Jesus related to people. The truth of scripture is that "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them" (Genesis 1:27): one kind of human with a wonderful variety of features, each valued for his or her uniqueness.

This is why the two stories we have heard this morning are so important. We learn that there was a drought in the land caused by the evil of King Ahab. Elijah, the prophet of the Lord, was at risk, first because of his dire prophecies against the king and, second, because of the famine brought on by the drought. Initially, he hid out in the wilderness and was kept alive by ravens who brought him bread and meat twice a day. In order to save his life, God sent the prophet Elijah to Zarephath where he found a poor widow collecting wood she intended to use to cook a last meal before she and her son died from starvation. The prophet assured her that neither her meal nor her oil would run out. God took care of their need and she took care of God's prophet. The king, however, failed in his duties to care for his people who were at a great risk. It was this nearly forgotten widow who provided for the prophet of God.

In Mark's gospel, we read about another widow, one who went to the temple and gave what she had to the treasury. In Jesus' estimation, her gift was more extravagant and more valuable than those of wealthier people who paraded their gifts before the priests. A widow, living hand to mouth day by day, sustained the temple ministry with her generous gift.

The point of these stories is that we should not overlook or forget people who may be insignificant, almost invisible, to us for they are often the ones who hold life together for us all. A few minutes ago, the choir sang Johanna Anderson's beautiful poem titled "Lord of the Small." She reminds us that God does not see us in the various categories we have created. Instead, God sees our need and our gifts, our limitations and our potential. Above all, God sees his own children whom he has made into a wonderfully diverse and fascinating family.

Why then, do we hear such hatred directed by one part of God's family toward another? When the concept of race is nothing but a human construct which violates God's sense of humanity, why do we separate ourselves and denigrate one another? When gender is a gift of God, why do we quibble over which gift God has given to us as if we ourselves are God? When every child of God is endowed with gifts and abilities that add to the matrix of humanity in delightfully different ways, why do we count some of us as better than others of us? When we all have something to teach the other about our experience of God, why do we demean and demonize the ways in which God might have spoken to someone else when we are not willing ourselves to listen to what God is telling us?

Sometimes our disdain for another group of people is subtle, so subtle that we hardly even notice our negative attitude toward them. It emerges in worn-out jokes about ethnicity or gender or religion. It bubbles up when we are angry and place the blame on someone who is not responsible. It raises its ugly head when our frustration at the state of the world overwhelms us and we look for a scapegoat instead of asking the difficult questions about our own responsibility. When we place blame or responsibility on a particular group of people simply for existing, we deny their God-given right to live and grow and prosper. By our denigration of another human, we deny that God is the creator of all which, of course, is the very bedrock of our faith in God.

Week by week, we experience natural disasters that rip home, livelihood, and life away from many people. In most cases, we rush to the aid of those who are in peril because we have a sense of shared humanity and need. And week by week it seems, we witness horrific acts of violence toward people who are deemed less than human and unworthy to share this planet with us. Obviously, mental illness is a primary factor in many of the violent attacks that happen in schools and synagogues, in churches and in clubs. Behind and perhaps fomenting that illness is often a sense that the perpetrator himself or herself is less worthy, less human than the rest of us.

We seek to make ourselves large by making someone else small. Certainly our public discourse often triggers unkind and unjust feelings toward other people.

From beginning to end, scripture reminds us that we are all the children of God and that kind and generous acts of compassion are what make us large in the eyes of God while mean and selfish acts of hatred make us small in the eyes of world.

No matter who we are, where we are from, what color skin we wear, what politics we practice, whether our bank account is large or small, or whether our opinion of ourselves is overblown or underrated, we are all the children of God. And if we pay attention, we will discover that the ones among us whom we consider to be small, are the very ones who hold the fabric of life together for the rest of us.

Believe the witness of scripture that God created one humanity, fashioned us in his image, and breathed into us all the breath of life. And God said, "Good!" Amen.

November 11, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We have come, O Christ, anticipating your open arms. Wrap us in the reassuring embrace of your love and listen to the whispers of our prayers.

We praise you, O God, for all of the goodness that has come our way. We know that every good gift, every blessing, every delight in life is a treat of your grace lavished upon us. In the few hours that we have been awake, we have been blessed in more ways than we have even realized. And in the hours to come, we know that the abundance of your kindness will astound us. Thank you for all of your generosity, undeserved by us, but initiated by your love.

On this day we are mindful of the thousands of people who stand watch hour by hour to protect us and to defend freedom throughout the world. We are grateful for each one who serves today and for all of the women and men who have served our nation in years past. As we mark the one hundredth anniversary of the end of the First World War, may we resolve never to allow war to threaten our planet again. Grant us your peace, we pray.

On this day, we are also mindful of the thousands of people who have lost homes and livelihood to fires, floods, and wind. We think of the people who have lost loved ones to violent attacks and of everyone who has lost a sense of security and hope. We pray for them all and for ourselves as we try to find ways to deal with the horrors of loss and the threat of hatred.

Sometimes all we can do is to come to you, O Christ, and fall into your arms. Grant us refuge and peace as we regain our footing and stand together against the evil around us. Grant us renewed hope so that we never give up. And help us to redeem your world for the goodness you intended from the beginning. We offer our prayers and our hope in the name of Christ. Amen.