



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Trouble in the Court of Women

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 8, 2015

The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Mark 12:38-44

When one of the Gospels tells a story, it tends to be a version that has been pared down to its skeleton—you might say a CliffsNotes version of the story—which could then serve as a departure point for the next storyteller to expand it, to fill in the gaps, which are legion. The Gospels, and preachers, so often, presume you know what they are talking about when they mention, say, a Roman legion or the River Jordan. But, unfortunately, in our time, we are at quite a disadvantage. So many of these pivotal parts of the story of Jesus have to be resuscitated, at least in our imaginations, so that we can come out of a kind of fog and grasp what was happening.

In this particular Gospel, knowing a little about the Temple, and what it was like, makes this selection many times more striking and lively. Unfortunately, the Romans destroyed the Temple in the year 70, so there is nothing that conveys the grandeur and the scope of the place beyond artistic renderings and models. Actually, most films of Jesus' life don't portray the Temple that well. It would take a huge budget to do it right. Perhaps with all of the digital movie magic that is possible, a movie might approach the powerful settings. For now, we must use our imagination.

Perhaps I could use St. Bart's to approximate the setting. First you would start with the reason why the Temple is there, as a place for the Holy of Holies. I'd put that behind the altar railing. It would have been a great silent and empty room, with a thick veil woven of cords surrounding it. And only the High Priest could enter that room, and only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, when the priest would intercede for all the people, asking God to forgive their sins. Beyond the veil would be the rest of the inner sanctum, with a special lampstand, the actual Menorah, and a table for the holy bread of the presence, the Shewbread, and an altar for incense to fill the place with the cloud of God's presence. Outside of the inner sanctum in the open air in front of the great doors would be the slaughter tables and also the sacrificial altar where the animal offerings would be burnt to offer them to God. And in this priestly courtyard, Jewish men, as long as they were ritually clean, could gather to observe the liturgies. The legend goes that the incense and smoke was so strong that the goats would sneeze for miles around. But through another Beautiful Gate of bronze doors and down the steps, into a square courtyard about the size of the Josie Robertson Plaza at Lincoln Center, was the Court of Women, so called because this was as far as the women could go in the Temple. They couldn't go through the Beautiful Gate at the top of the steps. They could help weave the veil of the Temple, as Mary is said to have done when she stayed with her cousin Elizabeth, but they would never have been able to see it.

This Court of Women would have been full of activity, people going to and fro for a variety of Temple tasks. It would have been a place to crane your neck to watch the morning and evening services going on in the priestly courtyard. But in between services so many things were happening. It was quite interactive. In one mini-courtyard you had people sorting out the good wood from the worm-eaten wood for the main altar offerings. In another area you would find lepers cleansing themselves. In another, the devoted Nazarites would have been cutting off all of their hair as a sign of their impressive vows to God.

Also in the Court of Women, you would find the Treasury. This is how they funded all of the activities of the Temple. And putting your money in the Treasury would have been one of the highlights of any pilgrimage. But the Treasury, in this case, was not a separate building. It was many separate stations where you would be expected to place your money into large wooden canisters, with a narrow slot at the top and a wide, round base at the bottom.

They looked like large upside-down trumpets, thirteen in all, each with an emblem of what the money in there was used for. One trumpet was for the wood used in the temple. Another was for the incense. One was used to pay for the golden vessels. There were trumpets that were set aside solely for the purpose of leftover money after a person had given for all of the usual purposes. The chasm of income inequality would have been on display for all to see. There would be people like Mary, who, when Jesus was a boy, would have placed her money into the Treasury trumpet devoted to turtledoves. And that would have been about it. But there would be those with fine robes, long trains carried by small children to avoid getting them dirty. Celebrities. Elites. People with impressive reputations and enough education for long, sophisticated prayers. They would marvel the crowd with their parade, placing money in every single trumpet. And perhaps they gave an offering to a few of the ever-present needy street orphans and prophets and prophetesses in the courtyard.

It was in this lively place that Jesus set himself opposite the array of trumpets, opposite the Treasury, in a kind of defiance, to point out a pathetic scene. Alongside one of these masters of the universe placing money in every pile, Jesus pointed out a destitute widow, pinching two coins in her delicate hand, taking great care to steadily place her offering in the slot, perhaps the same turtle dove slot for the poor that Jesus' mother would have used. Then, he called the disciples together to point out this living parable. "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the Treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole life."

At first glance, it seems like Jesus is lifting up the widow and her two mites as an example of faith and generosity, that even the poorest among us have something to offer God.

But it goes deeper than that. There is something horribly wrong with this picture. The system of the Temple is broken, so much so that it is breaking people, the very people that the scriptures and the prophets have urged Israel to protect and support. The epitome of the needy was seen as the destitute widow. These are the prime examples of those who fall through the cracks of a flawed society and need our help. And yet, the Temple and the scribes of the temple have set up a system that instead of supporting them, "devours widows' houses," as Jesus said earlier in the reading. The widows are pressured to give, even when they have so very little. And the grim thing is that the faithful widows believe what their leaders tell them. Like a lonely retiree giving her Social Security check to the nice preacher on the TV for a blessing. It is from a good impulse. But as a result of their faith, their ability to survive is compromised. The widow's faith is paired with leaders who pressure and manipulate and have their ethical wires crossed. Is this really what the Temple was built to do? Chew widows' households up and spit them out? And on top of that, be a stage for those who make a show of giving their table scraps away? The contrast of wealth and piety must have been heartbreaking for those, like Jesus, who dared to consider it. It was deadly for those who would mention it.

The Temple was meant to be a kind of copy of heaven on earth, a kind of reproduction of the heavenly court so that the earth might be set right again. And much of Jesus' work in the Temple was revealing how it was doing a great amount of harm, and warning that it wasn't going to last long. Do you see how brazen it would be to say within the Temple: "Do you see these great buildings," Jesus portends. "There shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down." These warnings got Jesus into hot water, but he couldn't hold back. Jesus could see the writing on the wall. And he wanted his friends to think about what life under God might be like without a Temple. This is part of what his institution of the Eucharist is about, making people's homes into Temples with the dining table as an altar for the holy bread. This is why he talked about his own body and our bodies as kinds of Temples. But we will do better. In our Temples we offer bloodless sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. In this Temple we offer our own lives in love and devotion to our neighbor.

The Widow was, alongside being an example of good faith, exhibit A of how people of good faith can be led astray by corrupt leadership, by "the hired hand that does not care for the sheep." If we are not careful, the best of faiths could establish institutions that gobble people up, loading people with guilt and a sense of not-enoughness, or perhaps that they deserve their lot in life. Jesus cared so much about our institutions. He wept and he raged at how it had all gone wrong. And he, like the widows, would be devoured in a few weeks. But his death would start a process that would derail this train, ultimately. It is a process that is still working itself out in our Temples.

I wish faith were just between you and God. But it isn't. It is between you and God and your neighbor, which means it is a field of relationships, some unnamed and others that are named and claimed: our institutions. But our faith is not about making an institution that demands things from others, propping up a church in fear and trembling. We are called to coordinate our lives into a gift, not only to God, but also to others. Not by giving to be valued by others, or out of an anxious heart, but by giving a share of what we have, proportionally (If you've hung around long enough, you will know that this is our tradition now) with no comparisons or showmanship, so that our institutions are healthy and fair, and everyone in our sphere has enough.

Jesus lifts up this widow so that she might break our hearts. So that we will join Jesus in the defense and support of those in need in our broken societies, freeing us to dream about what her life could be like if her good faith was met by a host of good shepherds. We live a life like this not so that we get into heaven, but, instead, so that when we get to heaven, we will have had some measure of experience and recognition, so that it might be like greeting an old friend and picking up where we left off, in heaven like we knew it on earth.

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