

24th Sunday after Pentecost – Bad Reasons for Good Works

Mark 12:38-44; Hebrews 9:24-28

Paul Smith's College was about to receive a \$20 million dollar donation. The only catch was that it rename itself after the donor: Joan Weil-Paul Smith's College. When a judge disallowed the name change, Joan Weil completely withdrew the offer. Motivation: not the benefit of the college, but to immortalize herself.

The Gospel lesson could be subtitled: "bad reasons for good works". The world is always greatly impressed with good works. They become the measure by which we judge people's integrity and worth. They also become the way by which we seek to build ourselves up. Religion, and religious folk like us, are always tempted to be drawn away into a "look at me" show, as Jesus says when he lambasts the scribes, the religious experts of his day: "Beware of them, because they put on a good moral and religious show with their speeches and prayers and good works in the communities, but really it's just a show to get something for themselves".

Bad reason for good works: "What's in it for me?", giving in order to get something for yourself. Mrs. Weil a perfect example, and so were the scribes...

But Jesus says that we are all tempted to do this. In fact, in Old Adam in us (sinful nature) is so good, so sneaky at turning even our best intended works into ways to build up our own selves: either to prove our worth and goodness to those around us, or to buy a little favor from God, or just to get that "good feeling" giving gives.

This question then is to be applied to us: "Why do I do the good works I do?" ...Freely, for the sake of God's glory and the help of those around me, or for what I can get out of it for myself? When others don't recognize or return the favor, am I hurt or resentful?

Good examples: widows who give, not out of their abundance, but out of their want. Here they had no self-interest to promote, for they nearly had no self at all. These were women on the verge of starvation themselves. Women who had no one in all the earth to care for them, and yet we see them not clinging to their last pennies, not holding on to the last loaf of bread, but giving! Such behavior seems almost insane, and yet Scripture holds them out to us as examples of giving; not the experts and the rich, whom the world considers to have arrived and be pinnacles of virtue and good works.

Why? Why did these women give out of their want? Why did they break what science calls the "natural evolutionary drive towards self-preservation at all costs"? Why would they be so unwise in the use of the nearly nothing they had, and seem to hasten their way into death by giving

their last to God, and to his servant Elijah? Why did they not wait to become secure in the world's understanding?

Because they had been shown, and had come to know a source of life beyond what man knows by his senses, beyond the work of human hands, the scheming of human minds. They had come to know and trust the true source of life: the LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Israel. The God who by his unseen hand feeds and nourishes all the earth; who owns all things, even and especially what we consider to belong to us. There is no grain in the field, no animal on the hills, no penny in your bank account, no inch of your home, and no hair on your body that does not belong to God, and God alone. How much more is this true for us Christians, as St. Paul says, "*You are not your own, you have been bought with a price*", and St. Peter, you were "*ransomed...not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.*" (1 Peter 1:18)

They had come to know this God who both provided for all creatures their food, their breath, their life, and provides for their rescue from death and decay. This God, who sat there in that Temple on that day in the flesh of Jesus, observing those who gave great offerings, or so they thought, but who saw the lowly widow give the greatest offering, a true sacrifice... This same God the Son who sat there was about to make a greater sacrifice, the greatest, and a greater offering to God His Father, the greatest offering without which all our offerings to God, all our good works, are worthless, vain, and purely self-serving; and without faith in this Jesus' sacrifice our own works only hasten our death and demise by increasing in us the delusion that we too can make ourselves alive by something we can do...

This is the certain demise of man: to believe the secret poison flowing through our veins that whispers to us: "man, you can make life for yourself, make a name, be praised, keep your wealth, find happiness find life on your own, just..."

Yet, for those who have come to the end of their ropes, like these two widows, that illusion, that lie, is abolished, and they are ready to receive the Word of God spoken to them, the Word of promise. They are ready to truly come to know God in His Son Jesus; God on the cross for us, God in our grave for us, God victorious over our sin and death, the God whose death on the cross "*once for all at the end of the ages put away sin by the sacrifice of himself*", "*offered once to bear the sins of many*", and now that same God the Son stands in the heavenly places pleading and interceding for you and me before His Father. This God has promised to provide for your needs, like He did for the widows – "*the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; he upholds the widow and the fatherless...*" And His provision is enough. He is the source of life for us, of money, of food, of breath, the source of every breath...and His provision will not dry up, though

it will not always be as we think it should be, or as much as we think, or come in the way we think.

And yet, here He provides much more necessary provision for our life in the age to come, when this earth will pass away and a new one will take its place. Here is that eternal offering the most precious provision made present at His Table, the promise of the forgiveness of sins, of God's favor, not taken away from you by your sin, for He has put away that sin. He intercedes for you so that those who cling to Him by a true and living faith, the Father no longer sees their sins for they are swallowed up by Jesus. Rather, He sees only Jesus' righteousness imputed to you.

If coming to know and grasp and own and be owned by this God so liberated these widows from the fear of deprivation, so opened to them the gate of heaven that even the crushing woes of this earth could not move them from giving completely of themselves for God and His Kingdom in this world, what then, beloved, will it do for you when you grasp Him in that way, and for what good work will that faith born of heaven equip you?