

Two Wholehearted Women

Text:

Mark 12: 41-44

“And Jesus sat over against the treasury, and beheld how the people cast money into the treasury: and many that were rich cast in much. And there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing. And he called *unto him* his disciples, and saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury: For all *they* did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, *even* all her living.”

Mark 14:1-9

“After two days was *the feast of* the passover, and of unleavened bread: and the chief priests and the scribes sought how they might take him by craft, and put *him* to death. But they said, Not on the feast *day*, lest there be an uproar of the people. And being in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at meat, there came a woman having an alabaster box of ointment of spikenard very precious; and she brake the box, and poured *it* on his head. And there were some that had indignation within themselves, and said, Why was this waste of the ointment made? For it might have been sold for more than three hundred pence, and have been given to the poor. And they murmured against her. And Jesus said, Let her alone; why trouble ye her? she hath wrought a good work on me. For ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good: but me ye have not always. She hath done what she could: she is come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying. Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, *this* also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her.”

Introduction:

We are looking at some of the heroes of the last days of Jesus. We are asking the question: “Why in evil times, when the majority either given in and join forces with evil, or remain passive and silent, do some distinguish themselves by taking great risks in performing righteous acts?” Last week we looked at a scribe, who distinguished himself from the other scribes who by stealth were trying to entrap Jesus, by asking Jesus a sincere question and allowing him to answer, and then having the courage to admit before his colleagues that Jesus had given a good

answer. Today we have read the account of two women who performed acts which gained the approval of Jesus. They are united by a common motive -- wholeheartedness.

The first, Jesus simply observes. As he is leaving the Temple with his disciples they pass through the area in the Court of Women where the trumpet-shaped offering coffers were located. They pause for a moment and observe while people deposit their offerings. They see some rich people who give significant amounts, but the offering that impresses Jesus is that of a very poor widow who gives two coins that together would have been worth less than a penny. What impresses Jesus is not the amount given, but the amount that was left after she had given. The disciples, with their pragmatic way of seeing things, would, no doubt, have advised her to keep her two coins. After all they would have been of almost no significance and she could have used them to buy a bit of food, but Jesus commends her. There is a similar story told by one of the early rabbis. He tells of a certain priest who rejected the offering of a handful of meal from a poor woman. That night in a dream he was commanded: "Do not despise her. It is as if she had offered her life." This account like the one we have read, serves to stress the qualitative difference between the God's perspective and ours: "man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart." What impressed Jesus was not the amount, but the wholehearted love for God that motivated the act.

This widow's act is a concrete demonstration of what Jesus had told the scribe, namely that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." That is what God wants, wholehearted love, and when it is given it goes neither unnoticed nor unrewarded. It is what purifies our motives and makes our acts acceptable to God. In the end God desires nothing from us except our love, but that he desires to be wholehearted.

If the first woman is remarkable for the insignificance of her gift, the second is remarkable for the extravagance of her gift, an alabaster cruse of very fine nard that was worth a year's wages for a working person. The disciples object to this extravagant act and begin to speculate on all the good that could have been done with the money had the perfume been sold instead of poured out on the head of Jesus, but Jesus rebukes them, and approves of the woman's act by saying simply: "she has done a good, or a beautiful thing."

As we look at these two women and observe their wholehearted, single-minded acts of devotion, the most important thing we can learn from them is found in the reaction of Jesus. In both cases the human reaction was, at best neutral and at worst negative, but the reaction of Jesus was very positive. Now, in the end our great desire in life should be to please the Lord, and we only really flourish and find the joy that God intended us to know when we do please the Lord; so we should be more than curious as to why these two women pleased the Lord, and

what we can learn from them so that we too may gain a “well done” from our Savior. There are many lessons to be drawn from them; I want us to focus on two.

I. Wholeheartedness purifies our motives

What unites these two women is the wholeheartedness of their acts. Both do what they do with wholehearted love for God. They forget themselves and act out of purity of heart. This kind of whole-heartedness is what Jesus meant when he said: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). Purity of heart is singleness of motive; it is loving God above all other things. Our chief problem is often a divided heart, and a divided heart keeps us from seeing clearly and acting wisely. Without wholehearted love for God neither of these women would have done what they did. In the case of both we see no evidence of that inner struggle that is so often the lot of humans; that inner dialogue that says: “I should, no I better not”. Their acts are both extravagant and decisive. They do not hesitate, but act with that inner conviction that only whole-hearted love can give.

This is a lesson that we would all do well to learn. How many times does fear overcome love and hold us back from doing the good thing, because the good thing seems too costly, too extravagant. This is what John was getting at when he wrote: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (I John 4:18). Wholehearted love purifies the motives of selfish intent and enables us to act with clarity and simplicity. It takes our attention off ourselves, the giver, and puts it where it should be on the recipient. How we are blessed when we are the recipients of the wholehearted love of others, and how we bless others and please God when we act out of wholehearted love.

II. Wholeheartedness leads to effective action

The second thing that we learn about wholeheartedness is that it leads to effective action. One of the most telling sentences in these texts is when Jesus rebukes the disciples for their attitude towards the woman who had anointed him by pretending to desire some greater good. This is where he tells them that they can give to the poor anytime, but what she had done could only have been done at that moment. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity and her wholehearted love had opened her eyes to recognize it and to seize it. Since Jesus knew that he would die as a criminal, he knew that at the time of his death he would be denied this most basic human dignity according to the tradition of his time to have his body anointed for burial, but this woman through the eyes of wholehearted love and at great personal cost had done for him

before his death what would be denied him after death. Therefore, Jesus says of her: “she did what she could.”

Now isn't this all that any of us can hope for. There are many things that we can't do, but we all want it to be said of us: “he (she) did what she could”. To gain a full appreciation of how important this is, we need look forward only a matter of hours in the texts when Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane and he asks his disciples to stay awake and to pray with him as he faces his agony, but they fall asleep; not once, but twice. Unlike this woman they do not recognize the importance and the uniqueness of the opportunity that is theirs, and they waste it. They did not do what they could, because they did not have the wholehearted eyes of love to perceive the opportunity that had been given them.

Do you understand what Jesus is telling us here. Wholehearted love opens our eyes it enables us to see the opportunities of life as they present themselves to us; to do what we can. There is a prayer that I have shared with you on previous occasions, but it fits here, so let me repeat it: “Lord I am only one person, and I can't do everything, But I can do what I can I can do, so by your grace help me to do each day all that I can.” May it be said of each one of us, like it was said of this woman: “She did what she could.” Wholehearted love will open our eyes to the opportunities of life and move us to act in such a way that this will be true.