

Proper 27B (Pentecost 23), 2009

Text: Mark 12:38-44

Title: Love Gives Faithfully

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She was invisible. Or at least that's how she felt most days. When she was younger she had turned a few heads, and people noticed when she walked through the market.

But not any more. Now she was just another one of the old ladies. People only noticed her to avoid her, to look away, and to keep from seeing what old age would do to a person.

She was a widow. More than anything else, this one fact defined her life. In a society where men were the providers and protectors, she was all alone.

Loneliness was her way of life. She had come to accept it. Her husband died year ago, but she missed him every day. She would still catch herself looking around for him to ask him a question, only to find that there was no one there and that she was all alone.

In her darker moments, she just wanted it to be over. She wanted to be with her husband again. She wanted all the aches and pains to be gone. She couldn't understand why she had lived for so long. She didn't think she was very useful any more.

It was a hard life, being a widow. She was now forced to rely on the kindness of others- farmers who left a little grain in the field, or a few grapes on the vines. She had been a proud woman, but now she had to beg for a living, and live off of handouts.

A younger person might have been able to handle it better. But her aches and pains made even the simplest task seem impossibly difficult. Every day was a struggle just to survive. The holidays were the most difficult. She remembered the happier times when the whole family had celebrated together. But this year it was just her. Again. And it's hard to celebrate all by yourself.

But she was a creature of habit. She kept the family traditions alive, even if she was the last one, the only. Every year she said to herself, this will be the last year, but the next year she would find it too hard to give up, so, it would be one more year.

So she made the long, hard trip to Jerusalem for Passover, just one more time. Some of the fellow pilgrims were kind, offering her a sip of water here or a piece of bread there, but for the most part they ignored her. They were much too busy with their own families and their own celebrations to pay much attention to her. She was invisible.

Eventually she made it to Jerusalem, in plenty of time for Passover. She felt out of place with all the young families and kids running around, but it was good to be back in the Holy City once more.

Some things had changed, but mostly things had stayed the same. Construction at the temple was moving along, but it seemed like there was still plenty of work to be done. There were the same rumors and talk of rebellion and messiahs, even a country boy from Galilee who was riding around on a donkey, but she had stopped paying attention to those years ago. She was too old to get caught up in all that. It was the same old Jerusalem.

Tuesday morning she made her way to the temple. She had tried to go on Monday, but there was a huge commotion, she heard that someone had been in there making quite a mess- overturning tables and chasing animals around. It was too much excitement for her, and so she decided she'd better wait another day.

So she slowly climbed the steps of the temple. When she was younger, she hardly noticed them, but now every step was painful. Every step seemed higher than the last. She had to stop and rest several times before she finally made it to the top and found the entrance to the temple courts.

The temple was a busy place. It was always busy. People were buying and selling animals for the offerings. Foreigners from all over the world were there for the holidays. The temple seemed to be overflowing with teachers, and important looking people. They were strutting around in their long, flowing robes, with their chests out, trying to look important. She smiled and laughed to herself as she thought how much they reminded her of the roosters she was used to seeing strutting around the barnyard. She half expected one of the scribes to start flapping his wings and crowing.

She was in was called the "women's court" of the temple. It wasn't just for women, but women weren't allowed to go any further into the temple. Around the edges of the court were 13 jars. The jars were shaped like up-side down trumpets. This is where the collection was taken. People placed their coins in the top and the rolled their way down into the base of the jar.

She was still tired from the long trip up the stairs, and so she stood back for a minute to catch her breath. She watched how the other folks gave their offerings. Many made a dramatic show of it. They waited to be sure that everyone was watching, and they dropped their coins slowly into the jar so that they made as much noise as possible. The temple rang with the sounds of the coins clinking and clanking together.

She remembered how she and her husband had always given generously to the Lord. Even when they had had a bad year and money was tight, they still managed to give at least something back to the Lord.

This year she had been worried that she would have nothing to give. She was living hand to mouth now, and everything she scraped together seemed to go as quickly as it had come.

As she reached into her pocket, she felt the two small copper lepta that she had managed to save. It everything and it was nothing.

She was tempted for a moment to leave them in her pocket. After all, she needed them. What difference would it make? Compared to those who gave stacks of gold and silver coins, what

difference would these two copper coins make? Maybe she should just give one and keep the other for a rainy day. There was the whole trip back home, and who knows what else might come up?

“No,” she thought, “My life is in the Lord’s hands. Whether I’m rich, or whether I’m poor, the Lord will take care of me. He’s done so in the past, and I trust He will keep me in hands as long as I’m around.”

And so she waiting for an opening and quietly walked past one of the jars. She slipped the two coins secretly into the jar and kept walking. They hardly made a sound as the rolled into the base of the jar. She thought she was invisible.

But she wasn’t. As she placed her coins in the jar, she saw one of the teachers looking at her. But he looked at her in a way that no one had ever looked at her before. He didn’t look past her, and he didn’t stare. He looked her in the eye, and He knew. She knew that He knew. His look made her nervous, and curious, and at peace all at once. He understood her in a way that no one else had.

But she kept walking, and didn’t stop, as the teacher turned back to say something to His disciples.

Three days later, she awoke to the sounds of the crowd yelling, screaming at the tops of their lungs, “crucify him.” By the time she got to the governor’s palace to see what was going on, she was too late and they were already dragging the criminals off to be crucified.

She didn’t usually watch the crucifixions. She didn’t quite have the stomach for it. Her husband used to watch, though, but she never went.

For some reason, she decided that she should be there this time, and so she followed the crowd off to Golgotha. It was a difficult walk over rough, uneven streets. So she was one of the last in line, slowly making her way through town. There was no real hurry. Some crucifixions took days.

By the time she made it to Golgotha, the little hill just outside the gate, the criminals were already hanging from their crosses. She could see that it was three this time. The Romans must be making an example of some folks, putting on a show for all the crowds in town for the holidays, she thought. Again, she wondered why she was there, but was somehow drawn to the scene.

As she got closer, she recognized the man who hung on the middle cross. It was the teacher from the temple on Tuesday, the man with the kind eyes. He was the last person she expected to see executed. She had only seen Him for a moment, but she had always been a good judge of character. What was He doing on a cross? But she knew that sometime life didn’t make sense. She had seen her own share of hardship and suffering.

Closer and closer she came, until she could read the charge over His head- Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. It seemed like an odd reason to crucify someone. Obviously this man wasn't the king. Caesar was king, and Pilate was the governor. But it still didn't seem like He deserved to be there. She couldn't see Him raising an army and trying to overthrow the government.

She could tell that He was in obvious pain. He was struggling more than the other two were. Every breath was a difficult ordeal. It didn't seem like He would last long at all.

As His breathing slowed and the light in His eyes began to dim, she heard Him speak, "Father, into Your Hands I commend my Spirit."

When she heard those words, all she could think of was Tuesday in the temple, the two copper coins, and how she, too, had placed her life in the Father's hands.