

Per Nestingen

November 13, 2009

It is Friday the Thirteenth. What an unlucky day to preach! Not only do I have to preach on a difficult text, but I have to do it in front of a row of religion professors that have all had me in class. Talk about pressure! Now, I could blame anything that goes wrong on this text, or this daunting day, but in reality not only does the chapel staff allow me to pick whichever text I'd like, they also let me choose which day I could preach. So, I guess I have no excuses! What was I thinking. . . You know, I hoped to learn a lot from all my different religion professors, and I did, but as I was preparing for today, I could hear all of their voices in my head, and it left me thoroughly confused. Thankfully though, four years of confusion leads to some great questions.

So let me begin by asking you a question. From our gospel reading, in which character do you see yourself best represented? As Jesus sits to watch people give to the treasury, what does he see in you? Are you like the rich, giving from your abundance? Or are you like the poor widow? Are you defined by your humble nature, or are you as the scribes that Jesus warned us about? I asked myself the same questions and I don't know if I like the answers.

In my life, I know a woman who can be compared to the widow in Mark. In fact, she has shown me, through almost identical circumstances, a feat of faith that I will carry with me the rest of my life. She played the prelude this morning, and she happens to be my mother.

Before I was able to come to Augie as a freshman, that summer was a long and devastating time for our family. You see, as the widow in Mark must be defined by a death to show us her feat of faith, so was my mother, at this time, given that test. My father died much quicker than we anticipated, much sooner than we wanted, and more dramatically than we could handle at times. Amoloidosis, his rare disease, can be cruel and quick. When the doctors gave him two to five years to live, we received just two months to hug him, pray with him, and laugh with him.

Many scenes of these months ran through my mind when I was thinking about how best to describe God's strength and faith that emanated from my mother at this time. Truly, when one should be breaking down, despairing, and wondering why, she took time to console those who had lost a friend, a cousin, a brother, a son, or, in my case, a father.

One scene stood out to me because I see it as I see our scene in Mark. At the memorial service, as hundreds of Papa's friends and family lined up to express their compassion to my mom, she stood at the front and cried with them, consoling them and helping them through THEIR loss. Through Their Loss. You see, I was able to sit back and watch this scene unfold, and I'm telling you, it was amazing. God was there.

As Jesus sat and watched people line up to give to the treasury, what caught his eye was a woman giving so that she had nothing left. I have seen this happen. The widow in Mark knows that she has only these two coins, and yet she sees that someone else may need them more than she does. She gives because, in her poverty, she can empathize with her peers. In her poverty,

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she understands that she will be alright. In her poverty, she sees that she needs to help those who are truly helpless, and in turn maybe when her luck gets even worse she will also be cared for.

Why on earth does it take the worst of situations for us to learn things as simple as giving? Why, even after I witnessed such great faith, am I still someone who gives from my abundance and not of myself?

Perhaps I can tell you a little story about being PARED away. You see, as I came to Augie for my freshman year, just months after Papa's passing, I was engulfed by a mentality that revolved around only me. What can Augie do for me? What was my major going to be? Is my roommate cool enough for me? What on earth is my roommate wearing? And finally, after weeks of living in the boys dorm, I began asking: what on earth is that smell?!? So, you see, I was doing a lot of bellybutton gazing, as Dr. Croghan puts it. I was focused on just myself because I had so much emotion inside of me that I felt lost if I started to think about it.

My mother being the great example that she is would tell me to just let go and let God, but it just wasn't that easy for me. I was given this fresh start and instead of embracing my father's death as a testament to my faith, I just kept it in as my problem to deal with later. I really think that my mindset was that I would go through all of college with this weight on my shoulders and then that would be some great feat that I could boast about.

Man, when I read this text today, I looked in the mirror and I saw a rich man giving nothing that I would miss. I saw someone who kept in the greatest things I could share in fear of revealing too much about myself. I was afraid to be a widow because that would show weakness. Slowly, I began to understand the blessings of the knowledge one gets from such a situation. Slowly, as Augie allowed me to grow, I became less of an abundance giver, and more of a widow.

Baseball is kind of my mini life. I'm a pitcher and when I'm on the mound, I'm in control of the entire game. So, when I see pitching as an opportunity to make things right at least symbolically, you can see how great of an outlet it can be. When I pitch, I have a chance to make everything make sense. I had one of those great chances on the day of my father's death. Just hours after he took his last breath, on no sleep and whatever food I could keep down, I pitched a complete game in our high school playoffs. Isn't that great? I sure thought it was, for a while. And it was; it gave my family an opportunity to take their minds off of the grief and focus on a game.

But when I told that story, don't I sound like a scribe? Don't I seem to ask for recognition? Is the story about me, or is it about God? That's what this is really about isn't it? God? I know when I tell this story, I feel like a scribe. Beware of the scribes, Mark says, who like to walk along in long robes and be greeted with respect!

I told you, this is a story of me being PARED away. So, God, in his own way, slowly began to chip at my cocoon. Baseball got harder, and harder. My arm, right now, is barely able to play catch. I'm almost forced to face the real world, forced to look around and see what help that I

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can be. Augustana has done wonders for me. Every day I realize more and more about not the tragedy of that summer before college, but rather what God has made a blessing as a result of it.

When freshman come to Augie, I think they all kind of want to get a degree and then get a good job and find a spouse. I don't have to worry about that good job much, since I'm an English major, but. . . Mark says, "She, out of her poverty, has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." If I actually lived that out, how would I be different? What would it take for me to give away all that I had to live on? I have so much excess, so much abundance. Don't we all? And if we really looked, people are suffering right under our noses.

Still we wait until something in our life brings us to such a tragic low that we are forced finally to understand how to give. I fortunately had this happen when I was young. My perspective on a lot of things changed. I'm not even close to figuring it all out, but I do see that I should strive to be like this widow.

Look at it this way: can you see the way that the widow gave her money as a symbol for how God's love is for us? In other words, if God had something, and knew that someone was in need, what percentage of it would he give to us? We know the answer to that question. So, let us strive to follow the example of God once more.

Amen.