



23rd Sunday after Pentecost (B)
Mark 12: 38-44
November 8, 2009
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+May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

A question that was on my mind most of last week was a question about being dependent. You know, dependent on someone else, dependent on a major income, dependent on the past as it shaped and has informed the present, dependent on a club, organization or sports team to give meaning and purpose in life, dependent on others to affirm, stroke or compliment? As we know, the flip side of dependent is independent. Some of us are more independent than we are dependent.

I have to tell you that there's a streak of incredible independence in me. I was brought up to be self-sufficient, 'get the job done' kind of guy, responsible to the end. Even as a child, I was programmed that way, and I have to tell you it's really hard to let that go.

What about you? Were you programmed one way or another as a child and a youth to be dependent on a parent, a grandparent, a baby-sitter, a nanny or a teacher? Or, were you programmed to be more *independent*, more self-reliant, less likely to see a need to be nurtured and care for by someone else?

These are big questions for us. Even as adults, we probably spend conscious or unconscious time dealing with challenges in life based on how we were brought up, more or less dependent, more or less independent. These are big questions in our first reading and our Gospel as well.

In first century Palestine, a woman such as Naomi would have been stripped of her dignity if her husband left her or died before she did. We already know that women were second class citizens but widows had even less standing in society. They were totally dependent on the good will of others, their families or their friends, for even the most meager of existences. In our first reading from Ruth, Naomi found a way back to dignity, a way back to a life less dependent on the good will of others, a way back to regaining a proper sense of self and worth.

Ruth loved her mother-in-law, Naomi, and through their mutual love, affection and inter-dependence, they found life. They found themselves on a mission to accomplish a great deal, and they did it. These two mission-driven independent women found life in abundance.

In our Gospel, we hear a very familiar story of *dependence*, the story of the poor widow. She gave what she had to the Temple, to the religious system that she knew that demanded much even from the least. However, this passage is as much about the widow and her gift as it is about the wealth and prestige of the scribes.

People bowed and scraped to them. They were the rich and powerful but *they* were dependent on others. They were dependent on taxes and gifts to enable them to continue to live lives far above those of most people of their day.

Does this sound familiar? Can we relate to this at all? Do we need to be reminded about the Bernie Madoff's of our day to see prime examples of people who lived extremely well, while taking advantage of others?

The Gospel calls us to look at both extremes of society in the first century and our society as well. However, our society counsels us to be more like the scribes than the poor widow. I don't know about you, but I was programmed for success. Indeed for those of us who grew up in the 1950's, 60's and early 70's, we were programmed to believe that the sky was the limit. The sky was the limit, wasn't it? We went to the moon. We even planted a flag there. We were the masters of the universe or at least we thought we were.

Isn't it interesting that during those decades our notion of financial success greatly expanded? People dreamed big dreams. People were programmed to believe that a house in the suburbs, two cars in the driveway, several TV's in various rooms of the family home, or a membership at the local golf course or country club helped to fulfill the American Dream.

Isn't it also interesting that during those same years, our churches were teeming with people? Pews were filled to capacity. Those were the glory days. Perhaps, it was a time when people weren't quite as full of themselves as evidenced in 1990's and well into the 21st Century. Perhaps, those were years in which many people grew further and further away from God, less and less aware of dependence on God. We became more and more capable of believing in the all-sufficient *self*, the self that could achieve just about anything including great wealth.

In my prayer and reflection this past week, it occurred to me that just maybe there was a significant correlation between those two eras of our American society: The rise to ascendancy and seeming wealth and the letting go of dependence on God to whom we owe everything in life. Today, we find fewer and fewer people aware of our absolute dependence on God and God's grace in our lives.

The widow in our Gospel gave all that she had. She had little, so perhaps giving what she had wasn't quite the gift of abundance that we often might think it was. The two coins she put in the Temple treasury wouldn't have bought her way out of poverty, but the widow's mission to give what she had demonstrated that God's grace was alive and well in her heart.

Jesus' gave what he had, all that he had: His life for the salvation of the world. That was *his* mission in life.

What is our mission in life? What is God calling us to in order that others might have life? What is God calling Parish of the Epiphany to do in order to demonstrate its commitment to bring life to others?

Our presiding Bishop, Katherine Jefforts Shori, recently said that "Our job most often is to discover the gifts we have and then to offer them to the opportunities and challenges around us. Even if the obstacles seem insurmountable, faithful persistence eventually will see the fruit of seed planted long ago." (Nov. '09 *Episcopal Life*)

How well are we listening to God's Spirit deep within us? How are we planning to offer ourselves for God's mission in the world? How are the gifts we have been given to be used in thanksgiving and service to God and God's people around us?

These are big questions. May God in God's mercy give us the grace to answer them. Amen.