

Pentecost 23 B 2009

Today we hear about two examples of women acting in faith. So, we know what faith looks like, we just saw it, but what does unbelief look like? Jesus discusses various activities which are good, but the reasons for doing them are wrong. Saying prayers, giving money and serving others are all wonderful activities, but doing things to get praises and accolades is not the response of faith. When we do something, it is a temptation to let others know what we've done. It's good for us to examine our motives. As one who wears long robes and likes attention, I should listen to Jesus' warnings. Going to Bible studies, showing up at prayer meetings and supporting church activities may make us look like good upstanding citizens; but the real benefit isn't in the way others look at us, with awe and admiration. The true reward is the Gift of God's word and his promise, not in our public displays of right living. Unbelief can look very pious, religious and righteous.

Christians tend to get into a contest for Godliness. People trying to out do each other. How spiritual are you? Sure you're doing a good job if you have a quiet time each day, but you are really spiritual if you do it first thing in the morning. If you think that earlier makes God more pleased, then Satan has you right where he wants you. Motives are important.

In today's Gospel many rich people were putting large sums of money into the treasury, but the person that Jesus hones in on is this poor widow. Out of her poverty, she gave all she had. To give away all of your money is to risk starvation. You might wonder how she was going to get by. Who was going to feed her? This behavior seems kind of reckless. This doesn't seem to be a very sound decision. Was she out of her mind?

Look at the reading from 1st Kings, here the widow chose to feed Elijah before she fed her son. Would any of you feed a stranger before you feed your own child when food is this scarce? Her son was more important to her than anything else in the world and she had so little food that she was already preparing to die, but she still served Elijah first.

These two stories are about trust. Trust in promises. Both women trusted in the promises of God and lived in his security.

I'm going to change gears for a minute.

Sometimes people find themselves in careers that aren't a good fit for their gifts. This was the case for a man named Frank. He was unhappy with work and so he quit his job. He didn't like what he was doing and so he knew that he needed to look for something else. He told his boss that he would no longer be employed at that company and he left the office. He went home to unwind and think about his next plan. He plopped down on couch and flipped on the TV and got comfortable. Frank wanted to relax for a little while as he began to assemble his new strategy. None of this sounds too bad, right? Well there are some details that you don't yet know. His wife was 7 months pregnant and set to go on maternity leave in four weeks. Also they had recently purchased a home and were making payments. So you can imagine when his wife Renee returned home she was in for a bit of a surprise. Upon her arrival she found Frank sprawled out in the living room taking in some of the afternoon's finest programming. She asked him about work and he said, "I quit, but don't worry, I will take care of it." What do you suppose is a normal reaction to this kind of situation? Did Renee say, "Have you completely lost your mind?" or something like, "You're only thinking of yourself". What do you think you would have done in Renee's place?

Well, Renee took a deep breath and asked Frank what sort of work he'd like to get into. He said he had always wanted to go into business for himself as a private consultant. Then Renee said, "If that's what you want, that's what I want, I am completely behind you." To trust that all the bills will be paid, along with the mortgage and don't forget the baby on the way, this seems like reckless behavior. But Renee's response came from a promise. She was holding on to Frank's promise to love her and take care of her as long as they both shall live.

Now look at the other side. Frank knew that whatever he did in life even if he failed, his wife was going to support and stand behind him. His wife encouraged him to see his venture through. So Frank opened his own consulting office. Frank would never have gone into business for himself if Renee hadn't been behind him. Back when Renee first saw her husband lying on the couch, her first impulse was to break down and cry. She was truly terrified, just as any normal person would be. But her trust in her husband was, is, and always will be stronger than her fear, even the fear of losing her house and not being able to provide sufficiently for her child. She trusts her husband and that trust is something that Frank treasures. The trust that she gave is truly priceless.

Remember those two small copper coins that the widow put in the temple account? They seemed like nothing to the world but to God they were a great treasure. Jesus said this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. Two thousand years ago one insignificant man died. And today it doesn't seem very important to most people, but what is significant is that he died for you. This is a treasure for you because it's the promise that he keeps for you forever.

The widow in today's gospel knew that God's promises were for her. God has a special place in his heart for widows. The psalmist proclaims that the Lord sustains the orphan and the widow. Each story has a promise, and someone who is faithfully keeping that promise. The woman in 1st Kings had a promise. Her promise was, "Do not be afraid...the jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth." God did not let the grain or the oil run out. They ate and were filled. God keeps his promises. The widow put the prophet's life ahead of her son's life. This is a model of how God put your life ahead of his son's life. This is how God shows his reckless love for you. Today the Psalmist says, do not put your trust in rulers or men for there is no help in them. Happy are they who put their hope in the Lord. He keeps his promise forever. But for you his promise is not that your oatmeal jar will never run out, but that his forgiveness for you will never run out. That is why the writer of Hebrews tells us that when Jesus comes the second time it is not to deal with sin. He has already dealt with sin. Jesus is coming to save you who are waiting for him. He is coming to take you to his house to be with him. That is his promise to you.