

## 1 Kings 17:8-16

<sup>8</sup>Then the word of the Lord came to him (Elijah), saying, <sup>9</sup>“Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” <sup>10</sup>So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.” <sup>11</sup>As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” <sup>12</sup>But she said, “As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.” <sup>13</sup>Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. <sup>14</sup>For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: 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.” <sup>15</sup>She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. <sup>16</sup>The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

## Mark 12:38-44

<sup>38</sup>As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, <sup>39</sup>and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! <sup>40</sup>They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

<sup>41</sup>He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. <sup>42</sup>A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. <sup>43</sup>Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. <sup>44</sup>For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

## \$243.58 Worth of Cheese Puffs\*

Opening Monolog: (come down to the floor)

“I think of myself as and o.k. guy, generous with my time. Always had a lot of friends. No better or no worse than anyone else. Same as most of you, I guess. I was very lucky to get a job right out of college in a field that I loved. Been there 35 years now. Married my high school sweetheart. We’ve been married, oh, 32 years. We have two sons, both grown. I live in a pretty good neighborhood. Got two cars and a nice home. And just like a lot of you, I have problems. Sometimes I don’t know how to talk to my wife or I don’t know how to communicate with my sons. Nothing new, same old story. But there’s always been this one thing...this...I don’t know, missing piece, I guess.

You ever get that? That sense of...lacking in your life? It’s haunted me a for a long time. It’s like that feeling you get when you’re driving on a long trip and you keep thinking, did I lock the front door? Did we leave the iron on? Did I turn down the furnace? It’s been bugging me so much lately that I’ve been thinking about getting some professional help, you know, get to the bottom of it. Did I hate my mother or resent my father, that sort of thing?

Then, I’m going through the mail today and I get this. it’s my tax return. Anyway, I open it and just stare at it for a long time. I made seventy-eight thousand dollars last year. Seventy-eight thousand dollars. Do you know how much I gave to charities? Two hundred and forty-three dollars and fifty-eight cents. I spent four times that much on business dinners and lunches. Four times that much just to eat.

I just feel sick about it. Is this who I am? And o.k. guy whose legacy is going out to dinner and playing golf? What does this say about me? About my character? This, all of this, the house, the cars, the fancy clothes, how long are they going to last? How long am I going to last? Have I done anything in my life that will remain as a testament to my character? Two hundred, forty-three dollars and fifty-eight cents.

You know how sometimes when you feel empty, you mistake that emptiness for being hungry, and you fill up on cheese puffs and you end up feeling stuffed and empty? That's what I feel like right now. Like I've filled our house and our lives with cheese puffs and I could have been feeding the world steak.

I don't know if this is all that's missing in my life. I can't imagine that all my problems are suddenly going to vanish if I start being generous with my money. I'm sure I'll still have times when I don't understand my wife and I'll never understand my kid's taste in music. But that sense of lacking, that hunger, that emptiness...that has to go. I'm not saying that I'm going to sell all my earthly possessions and live on a farm in Nepal.

I'm sure I'll spend way too much on business dinners and lunches – but I've got to change something. Maybe if I change this one thing, then other things in my life will be better, fuller. At least I'll stop wasting all that money on cheese puffs.” (move back to the pulpit)

Our story about the poor widow who gives her last two coins is often used to encourage us to give more money to the church especially during this time of year as budgets are being finalized and stewardship campaigns are in full swing. And I suppose if you are moved by this story to think about how much money you give to the church, we won't try to convince otherwise. But I think this story is about so much more than that. It strikes me as being about a relationship with God that compels one to consider what is of real value in your life.

The contrast couldn't be clearer as Jesus describes those who are living the good life with fancy robes, places of honor, prestige, and an expectation that others will not only notice them but applaud them for their piety and success. I would be willing to bet even the disciples looked on those scribes with a bit of envy and longing as they followed the very outcast and poor Jesus. And it also brings to light the contrast between what Jesus sees and what we see. Jesus takes it all in, doesn't he? He sees it all. The rich and the poor, the elite and the desperate widow. And where we often only see those who succeed, Jesus sees the outcast, the heavily burdened, those who are just making it, those who love God so much, that they will give their all, even when others don't notice.

It seems to me, at this moment in time, that this story is at some level about your love for God, something we talked about last week. And that Love, is something that moves you to make changes in your life, to have different priorities, Kingdom priorities, and it certainly challenges me, and I hope it challenges you as well. That perhaps like the character in the monolog today, we start thinking about what will truly fill us, truly satisfy our hearts and souls. What brings us joy and life. What will compel us to live generous lives for Christ's sake? And do we trust that God will provide even if we too give our all? And I am not promising that there will be any financial reward for doing so. There is nothing in the text to suggest that, contrary to many who believe in the prosperity gospel. Jesus is just seeing all this and making a judgement and it is certainly something to ponder.

Jesus is also illuminating those religious leaders who have created a system that is oppressive to the poor. This is not a new idea for us. Jesus has consistently collided with those in power who support systems that keep the poor and needy on the outside. “They devour widows houses”, is the way Jesus put it. And it should be a warning to those of us who claim to follow Jesus that when we support systems that oppress and devour the poor, the widow, the orphan, the needy, those on the margins and those at risk, that there may be consequences in the Kingdom.

Pastor Sharon Blezard shared these thoughts in her commentary and she certainly got me thinking a little bit. She said, “Perhaps there’s more to these stories than meets the eye, more than money, bread, and oil in the balance. Jesus is trying to teach his disciples about where to put their faith, their trust, and their absolute fidelity. He’s spending a good deal of precious time attempting to explain to them that his ways are not the ways of the world. His path is not the one that leads to power and might. Yet following Jesus is THE way to experience abundant life forever. Discipleship is about much more than two coins in the collection or one last meal before you cash in the chips.

What Jesus is getting at is the removal of anything that stands between us and his love. Perhaps it is the seeming security of the contents of our kitchen pantry or our earning power or even control over how we spend and give.

What would it look like for us as Christians to be the equivalent of these biblical era widows? How can we experience utter and complete reliance on God for every breath we take? After all, everything we have is gift. We do not really own anything but are entrusted with the management of the goodness and abundance of the Creator. My suspicion is that if we gather together as the Body of Christ and trust that our jug of oil and jar of meal will not turn up empty, then we will see and experience amazing things. God is good, and in God’s economy less is indeed more—less reliance on the self, yields a more abundant life. I double-dog-dare you to try it!”

There was a beautiful story I saw this past week about an elderly woman who was getting gas for her car and all she had was pennies to pay for it. A couple of men, who were brothers, overheard this as they were standing by and they were so moved by her need that they offered her cash to help out. Turns out her husband had recently died, and she was in a desperate moment, just struggling to get by. They stood together in tears with lots of hugging. You could hear one of the brothers saying, “It’s only right, we gotta stick together,” he told the woman. When she asks how she can repay them, they simply tell her to pay it forward. It truly moved me to tears.

Now, I’ll confess I’m not always generous with my resources. I often hesitate to share because, quite honestly, I am afraid there won’t be enough for me or mine. That may secretly be true for you as well. It is something that troubles me about myself, something I want to grow out of, I guess. I have many good friends, sisters and brothers in Christ, who are showing me how to do this by their generous lives. It certainly reminds me that I have a way to go to get to that place in my life of faith where I trust God for what I need. A place where I can give my ‘all’ and not be afraid. And not just financial resources, but other things like, love, forgiveness, acceptance, grace and mercy, something there is always an abundance of. Because truth be told based on what little experience I have, giving in this way brings a blessing that cannot be counted in silver or gold, dollars or pennies. And my hope is that when I come to that final moment perhaps Jesus will say of me, “He put in everything he had. He gave his all.”

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette penned these wonderful lyrics for our reading today and I’ll close with this. It is to the tune of Take My Life and Let it Be, which we will sing together in just a moment. Think of it as a warm up!

### **Jesus Sat and Watched the Crowd**

HENDON 7.7.7.7.7 ("Take My Life And Let It Be")

Jesus sat and watched the crowd  
At the temple treasury.  
Some that day were rich and proud,  
Making sure that all could see  
Their great generosity.

Then a widow came along  
Who had nothing she could spare.  
Yet her faith in God was strong  
And she gave as few would dare:  
All she had, she chose to share.

Just a penny, nothing more,  
Yet Christ said her gift was best.  
What a risk, for one so poor!  
What rich faith her gift expressed!  
Trusting, giving, she was blest.

Lord, you see the way we live;  
All within our hearts, you know.  
Like that widow, may we give.  
Trusting you, our gifts will grow  
And our joy will overflow.

So maybe we can all stop filling ourselves with Cheese Puffs and live unafraid, in ways that reflect the sacrificial love of Jesus. As Pastor Sharron said, "I double dog dare you to try it!" In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

\*\$243.58 Worth of Cheese Puffs by Timothy and Alice Bass. [www.dramaministry.com](http://www.dramaministry.com)