

November 8, 2009

Mark 8: 41-44

*"Dancing down the aisles"*

According to historical records, the Basques are the oldest indigenous people living in Europe, primarily in the region around the western end of the Pyrenees on the Bay of Biscay, parts of northeastern Spain and southwestern France. Though there are periodic reports of the rebellious acts of some in their numbers, most of their comings and goings are relatively mundane. And, as with every ethnic group, they point with pride to the notables who share their ethnicities, ones like Francis Xavier, Ignacio de Loyola, Simon Bolivar, Maurice Ravel, and contemporary soccer star Mikel Arteta Amatrain.

The particular report that piqued my interest in the Basque people was one aired a few years ago on National Public Radio. It described a celebration of the Eucharist in a particular church, probably Roman Catholic since that is the primary religion of the Basques. With music playing and the sanctuary filled with both people and the Holy Spirit, the elders danced down the aisles, literally, and up onto the Table! Yep, you heard me correctly. They actually danced right up on the Table in front of an entire body of believers, the priest and the Lord God!

At the time I heard the radio coverage of the lively service of worship, I was ministering in Iowa where Presbyterians and just about everyone else are "decent and orderly," a bit like Minnesotans. In fact one of my good friends and colleagues there, a native Iowan, once asked me: "Do you want to experience an Iowa hug?" at which point she did this...(Hold out hand.) Anyway, the idea of elders dancing down aisles and right up into the chancel area, never mind onto the Table, filled my heart with joy and gladness. But...I never convinced the Iowa elders to follow suit, though later there was a group dance around the sanctuary.

All of this came to mind while doing some exegesis on today's gospel text as well as pondering stewardship commitment. Most of us, I think, praise the actions of the poor widow and say that we are to do likewise. However, deep in our hearts we believe that giving all that we have would be downright foolish. After all, we have mouths to feed, mortgages to honor and bills to pay. Doesn't God want us to be responsible?? Truth be told, we're more like members of the crowd in the temple who were giving from their abundance. We meet our financial obligations *then* determine what we can give back to God.

Besides, when it comes to supporting the church and sustaining its budget, the poor widow's offering wouldn't put a dent in either. We continue to praise the poor widow for her generosity but who among us wants a whole congregation full of the likes of her? Instead it becomes necessary for us, we think, to go after the big donors as well as to increase our membership. Perhaps, educated as we are, we are missing the point of the gospel. The Rev. Dr. Scott Weimer, senior pastor of North Avenue Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia, recently wrote: "Jesus takes an opportunity in the passage before us to point out an unlikely person—a poor widow—as an example of what God values most in the stewardship of

money. I want to suggest that what Jesus values in this woman are a *Genuine Heart, a Grateful Spirit, and a Generous Attitude.*" (Day 1.org)

Sometime in the past, Choul asked if he and others of our Sudanese Christian brothers and sisters could receive the offering in their tradition. From the little bit that he said, I got the impression that there was far more celebrating than we normally experience. Although I replied to Choul in the affirmative, I have failed to be specific and he has not again asked. Perhaps now is the time!

It has occurred to me from time to time that we dignified but generally staid Presbyterians could learn a few things about worship from our more spirited sisters and brothers in faith. Though not all who count themselves among the latter to be mentioned come from different countries and cultures, surely many do.

The Rev. Dr. Scott Weimer remembered an experience he had several years ago which was somewhat like mine with Choul. A Kenyan woman who had joined the Atlanta congregation said that she loved the people but she really missed certain parts of worship from her home church. When the minister asked for specifics, she said "I miss the offering. In Kenya, we would sometimes dance down the aisles during the offering. We didn't have much to give, but what we did have we gave with much joy. What a privilege to give back to God!" (Ibid.)

What a privilege to give back to God! Now isn't that a revolutionary statement?!? Imagine what congregations would be like if all of us shared the woman's attitude! Each sanctuary would be filled with generous and spirit-filled people who sang, clapped hands and actually danced down the aisles in celebration. And when the Eucharistic meal was prepared, the place might resound with joyous song.

A personal wish of mine has been for sometime that a building might be named for the poor widow. Think of what a message would be proclaimed to the world at large if the spotlight was shined on someone who was so grateful to God that he or she gave the last penny in the pocket for the sake of others. Instead, we sing the praises of the wealthy who can pick and chose to whom they will make significant donations of money, then said people are immortalized for time and eternity as programs and institutions are built in their names.

Rev. Dr. Weimer has pointed to the values he believes that God appreciated in the poor widow...a genuine heart, a grateful spirit and a generous attitude. For me she also represents those who often go unnoticed in society...the forgotten men, women and children who have little or nothing yet somehow seem to be aware of the needs of those around them. Oh, I know, it takes one to know one, as the saying goes, but isn't it somehow easier and far more comfortable for human beings to notice the people who have much and give, as Jesus noted, out of their abundance? Perhaps it is because we are so caught up in a culture that rewards the successful. Hard to say.

The reality of the widow was that she was poor precisely because she was a widow. That's just the way it was in first century Palestine. No widow was rich because all women at that time were totally dependent on their husbands or other male relatives. So it was that the widow wasn't dependent on what little money she had or her position in life. She was (and this is pretty important) dependent on God. And much as we might say that we think she was pretty cool, it's doubtful that any one of us, especially those of us women who are independent in nature, will choose to swap places with her.

In September our clowns led worship with as they portrayed the Parable of the Two Pilgrims. The story was, as you probably figured out, based on the well-known tale entitled "Stone Soup." You may remember that in both stories two strangers wandered into a town looking for food and shelter. But the townspeople, suspicious and protective of what little they had, were reluctant to share. All held onto what was theirs, quite like some people do in real life. They were just afraid that if they gave, as did the poor widow, they would be left wanting big time.

Well, because the strangers in town were resourceful, they somewhat surreptitiously engaged the local citizenry in a collective effort. Slowly and one by one the villagers moved from behind gates and doors, bringing offerings as they were able. And in no time at all there was an abundance of food and a celebratory atmosphere. Though there was not mention in either tale of dancing down aisles or up onto a communion Table, it seems highly possible that such actions might have taken place.

Times are tough economically at this moment in time. Some of you in this congregation have lost jobs, others have had your hours cut, and many have seen your savings dwindle. Though there are signs that recovery is beginning to happen, we're still pretty unsure of our futures. And much as we might like to throw caution to the wind and emulate the widow's generosity, we're just too scared to do so. That's pretty much the way the townspeople felt in the fictional accounts mentioned earlier. But if we give willingly as we can, there will be more than enough to go around, just as there was plenty of food and drink for a hungry crowd.

Rev. Dr. Weimer shared a true story of real widows living on fixed incomes in inner city Atlanta. On the heels of speaking to a weekly prayer meeting of the women, a prayer request was made by a person who leads a ministry with the widows. "He said that he hoped to initiate a summer internship for urban and suburban young people to work side-by-side in making repairs to the homes of these widows." (Day 1.org) The cost to do the work, he told the women, would be \$10,000. Rev. Dr. Weimer admitted his surprise at such a request of people living on limited amounts of money. The first pledge, \$12, was shouted out by an 88 year-old woman. Prayers of thanksgiving were raised and pledges continued to be made.

Months later, Rev. Dr. Weimer encountered the ministry leader and asked about the summer project. The response was that "over \$10,000 was raised and the program was a huge success, bringing together young people from rich and poor backgrounds...a transforming experience for everyone involved. (Ibid.)

**Let us on this day allow ourselves to become vulnerable and utterly dependent on the grace of our Lord God. Surely if we open ourselves to the power of the amazing Spirit wonderful things will happen in the life of our congregation and in our individual lives. Who knows, the Spirit may just propel us forward in dance right down the aisles and into the chancel area. Thanks be to God! Amen.**

