

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 11/11/12
Christ Church, Tarrytown
Text: Mark 12:38-44

What an unsettling couple of weeks we've had! There was so much confusion and sadness around the devastation and loss when Hurricane Sandy hit, and survivors' guilt for those of us who didn't even lose power. Then came the attempts to mobilize to help those in trouble, but complicated by constantly changing information on how and where to be involved. And then the shortage of gas has made everything so more difficult.

Whatever anxieties we might have been experiencing about the election on Tuesday were compounded by the concern that people might not be able to get to the polls because of the effects of the storm. And then on top of that – a nor'easter. It's hard not to feel exhausted, disoriented, and helpless in these kinds of circumstances.

Maybe it's my disorientation and fatigue that's made me cranky. I'm struggling with the Jesus I see in today's Gospel reading. I just don't like him. As Jesus teaches in the temple, he points out the hypocrisy of the scribes. He's right, of course. It's not okay for them to be taking advantage of widows or praying publically just to impress people. But in this scene, I imagine Jesus looking critically at these folks, shaking his finger at them. I feel his judgment. Maybe I'm uncomfortable because, like the scribes, I'm wearing long robes and want to be greeted with respect and don't mind having a seat up front!

And then Jesus watches people putting money into the temple treasury. He rightfully commends a poor widow for holding back nothing, but then compares her to the rich people who contribute large sums of money. People who have a lot are giving a lot. Really – is that so terrible? Again, I sense judgment. And why should the poor widow put everything she has into the temple treasury when it's probably going to be looted anyway? It doesn't make sense, and it doesn't seem fair.

I've become captivated by a book called *The Wisdom Jesus*, by an Episcopal priest named Cynthia Bourgeault, from which I'm going to quote extensively. She suggests that when we hear Jesus say something to which our response is, "That isn't fair," it's a signal that we're missing his point.

According to Bourgeault, what grounded the life of Jesus and was the center of his teaching was the concept of "kenosis" – meaning "to let go" or "to empty oneself." As Paul writes in Philippians: "Though his state was that of God, yet he did not deem equality with God something he should cling to. Rather, he emptied himself, and assuming the state of a slave, he was born in human likeness. Being known as one of us, he humbled himself, obedient unto death, even death on the cross ..." Everything Jesus did, suggests Bourgeault, he did by self-emptying.

There are other religious traditions that recognize letting go and self-emptying as a path to the Divine. But Bourgeault writes that Jesus' "... idea of dying to self was not through inner renunciation or guarding the purity of his being, but through radically squandering everything he had and was. John the Baptist's disciples were horrified because he banqueted, drank, and danced. The Pharisees were horrified because he healed on the Sabbath and kept company with women and disreputables, people

known to be impure. Boundaries meant nothing to him; he walked right through them.”

But isn't squandering everything a pointless sacrifice? Bourgeault says no, and she cites the tale of “*Babette's Feast*” as an example of a kenotic parable of our times. *Babette's Feast* was a 1987 movie that was adapted from a short story by Isak Dinesen. Bourgeault writes:

As the drama unfolds, we discover that its heroine, Babette, had until recently been one of the most celebrated chefs in Paris, but during the political riots of 1871 she loses everything – restaurant, livelihood, and family. She flees for her life to rural Denmark and is taken in by two aging sisters who have given their lives to religious work, trying to hold together the spiritual community that their father founded. When Babette arrives, the remaining believers have grown old and weary, lost in petty bickering. Babette tries as best she can to lift their spirits, but nothing seems to be turning the situation around.

Out of the blue a letter arrives informing her that she has won three million francs in a lottery back in Paris, and she decides to treat these Danish peasants to a proper French dinner. She imports all the necessary ingredients: not only exotic gourmet delicacies for the seven-course meal itself (each with its appropriate wines, champagnes, and liqueurs) but the china dinnerware, silver cutlery, damask table cloths, and crystal glassware. The film zeroes in on the banquet table as the astonished Danish peasants are suddenly faced with this extravagant abundance. At first they are frightened and suspicious, but little by little the mood mellows as they slowly relax into gratitude and forgiveness. The last scene of that banquet night has them all stumbling, a bit drunk but very happy, out into the village square, where they form a circle around the fountain and begin to sing and dance together. After all these years they have finally touched the wellspring, and their hearts are overflowing. Then someone says to Babette, “Well, I guess you'll be leaving us soon, won't you, now that you're a rich woman? She says, “Rich? I'm not rich. I spent every penny I had on that banquet, three million francs... An extravagant sacrifice is in one sense wasted, because these peasants cannot really comprehend the magnitude of the gift, and by morning, when they've sobered up, they will probably have lost most of its beneficial effect. But no matter; the banquet table is set before them anyway. In her no-holds-barred generosity, Babette offers these broken, dispirited souls a taste of reassurance that their long years of faithfulness have not been in vain. She mirrors to them what God is like, what love is like, what true humanness is like. And she does it precisely by throwing away her entire escape route in a single act of extravagant abundance, extravagant beyond the bounds of earth, and therefore invoking the presence of heaven. That's the kenotic path.

Bourgeault continues:

... Abundance and a generosity bordering on extravagant seemed to be the signatures of both [Jesus'] teaching and his personal style... When he feeds the multitudes in the Sea of Galilee, there is not merely enough to go around; the leftovers fill twelve baskets. When a woman anoints him with expensive ointment and the disciples grumble about the waste, he affirms [her]....

... It's a path he walked to the very end. In the garden of Gethsemane, he struggled and anguished but remained true to his course. Do not hoard, do not cling – not even to life itself. Let it go, let it be – “Not my will but yours be done, O Lord. Into your hands I commend my spirit...”

... Over and over, Jesus lays this path before us. Everything can be embraced, but the catch is to cling to nothing. You let it go. You go through life like a knife goes through a done cake, picking up nothing, clinging to nothing, sticking to nothing. And grounded in that fundamental chastity of your being, you can then throw yourself out, pour yourself out, being able to give it all back, even giving back life itself..

... All too often our attempts at self-emptying feel isolated and pointless – “random acts of kindness...” ... They seem like dead ends, with no real connection to the world at large or even to our own best intentions...

... Jesus' [life and] teaching assure us that as we move along the very reckless and in some ways abundant and extravagant path of the kingdom of heaven, not “storing it up”... but “... “throwing it all away, that divine love is infinite and immediate and will always come to us if we don't cling... As we practice in daily life, in our acts of compassion, kindness, and self-emptying, both at the level of our doing and even more at the level of our being, something is catalyzed out of that self-emptying which is pure divine substance. Subtle qualities of divine love essential to the well being of this planet are released through our actions and flow out into the world as miracle, hope, and healing.

In this light, I see Jesus differently in our Gospel text. Rather than judging the scribes, I'm imagining that Jesus' words expressed deep sadness that those religious authorities who really did want union with God had it completely wrong. Gaining and getting - status, power, prestige, and wealth – become obstacles to the free fall of loving generosity involved in kenosis, which was the path of Jesus. And no, there's nothing wrong with wealthy people giving a lot from their abundance. But the poor widow who gave everything “got” what Jesus was about in a way that so few did. I imagine her in this scene – dropping her copper coins into the treasury, and dancing off with laughter at the freedom that her generosity gave her, knowing that God's extravagant love would flow back to her, because that's how it works. Jesus must have been utterly delighted that she understood. I bet his joyous laughter rang out with hers.

What are we working so hard to get? To what are we clinging? What would be terrifying for us to let go of? Might those very things be constraints to the free fall of extravagant, generous love that is poured out by God – over, around, and through us?

Jesus has mirrored to us what God is like, what love is like, what true humanness is like, and he invites us to be right there with him.

Amen.

