

Year B, the Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 27)

November 7, 2021

The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“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.”

So I have a confession to make... I made a grave liturgical error last week. I thought that All Saints, if it did not fall on a Sunday, was transferred to the closest Sunday. That is not true. What is proper is that it is transferred to the *following* Sunday. So when you have your post-Eucharist lectionary study group with friends from other churches, you all won't be on the same sheet of music. I apologize for my liturgical lapse.

I say that (mostly) tongue in cheek. I am the chair of the Diocesan Liturgical Commission, meaning I should know better. I was formed liturgically at a monastery. The monastic traditions find deep value in things like ritual precision. All the ceremonial movements, the rituals we enact, everything we do up here is done for a reason. I don't know all of the reasons, like why we add water to the wine, that is sort of a mystery tradition. It perhaps has something to do with the water/wine pouring from Christ's side, or perhaps it is related to the ancient tradition of watering the wine (Plato talks about this in his *Symposium* – lots of water = weaker wine = better conversation), or perhaps it has to do with the temperance movement, that is certainly where the grape juice comes from, but there is no clear, official answer. We just do it that way because we have agreed that that is the way to do it. Like we just transfer All Saints to the next, not nearest Sunday, because that is the way we do it. Tradition is a good in and of itself.

Because doing like your great grandmother did it pleases God? By no means! God could care less what day we celebrate All Saints (or even *if* we celebrate it). God doesn't care if the Eucharist is said in the proper form in the BCP, thought that is hard for some of us to believe. God doesn't care if we bow deep enough at the elevation of the elements. Or if we have a candle of the presence by the aumbry like we were recently given in memory of Dot Campbell. (It indicates that there is consecrated host within... that Jesus is present in that particular sacramental form). God doesn't even care if we use the right colors.

I was at a conference recently and one of the presenters told a story about giving a set of altar vestments to the church of his childhood. He grew up in a missionary Baptist church way out in the hills of western North Carolina, not a liturgical church, but *he* served Lutheran and Episcopal

churches and valued the calendar and wanted to share.... The set he gave was reversible, Purple/Red, White/Green, getting the necessary colors in just a few pieces of cloth. Well, they were thrilled with the gift. The pastor went home for Christmas and was both delighted and dismayed with what he saw. They had the altar frontal and pulpit hanging up. But instead of the white for Christmas or the purple/blue for Advent, they had a mix of the red on the altar and green on the pulpit. It was Christmas! God doesn't care what liturgical colors we use. God cares that we live our lives with joy and hope, and joy and hope are cultivated, in many ways, including in prayer and with mindfulness and reverence. And that is what all of the small print italics in the bulletin are about, and the rules about what day All Saint's should be celebrated, and what colors to use, because it is not about us, our tastes, but it is about focusing on God. And we do that, here, with mindfulness, reverence, solemnity and care. All of this stuff is just practice, but it is one of those sites of practice that we all get to enact together, and that is one of the Anglican ways to the promised land.

But how long do we spend in church each week? An hour and 15 minutes? (Not enough). A few of us also spend 20 minutes each morning at Morning Prayer. (Still not enough). Not enough to change a being. Not enough to hold on to the turn the other cheek, love your enemy, pray for those who persecute you kind of demands that Jesus Christ makes on us. I know that I can be a spiritually slow study, I need a lot of homework between Sundays to remind me of the narrow path our Savior has set us on. My guess is that most of us are in similar boats.

Today's Gospel reading, Jesus' story of the Widow's Mite, intimates a powerful, difficult and immensely fruitful practice that I commend to everyone: giving of your principal. The destitute widow gives what, 2 copper coins to the temple treasury? The rich are piling it in, but Jesus teaches, "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."

For reasons I won't get into here, I am not a very good planner. I am an in-the-present-moment kind of person in general, which is theologically sound, but presents a host of challenges in other aspects of my life. In any case, I think about the practice of giving usually about a week before our annual giving campaign starts, and I just don't want to be taking *that* page out of Oral Roberts' play book "Giving is good for you. Giving 'til it hurts is better and do I have an opportunity for you to practice giving to God by giving to the church! Operators are standing by." That just seems tacky and self-serving to offer a lesson on the practice of giving right before you ask

for money. So today, we END our annual HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL giving campaign, in which you all gave nearly \$230,000 to support the life and work of God in Christ through the ministry of this parish (YAY)! This was the second best campaign I have ever seen. Good job Lynne, Kevin, the vestry and all of you. Thank you. I say second best because the best I have seen was last year when we made our goal. I've never seen that before. I haven't run churches in the red, but it was always those gifts from heaven that showed up and closed the gaps. Great is the mystery of faith, though that kind of thinking drives conventionally financially savvy folks nuts. But with our campaign put to bed, now I feel less self-serving about speaking of the practice of giving. It's a little like saying grace after you have eaten. So today, I want to talk about the practice of giving.

The practice Jesus commends while watching that poor woman put two pennies into the coffer is giving not of our abundance, but out of our poverty. If we just give the extra, the excess, skim a little off the top to give to God or anything worth our while giving to, well, is that the cream we are giving? Or the scum? (Both rise to the top). If we give what we don't need, well, where is the sacrifice there?

There are few ways to look at the spiritual benefits of giving. Sacrifice is one of them. Giving to a level that you notice in your life helps remind you about what is important. That's the whole first fruits thing, it reminds you that you are giving. You can be reminded of God's presence in your life each time you decide not have that \$6.75 mocha, or buy Scotch one shelf down from the top (do you really need the blue one?), or scale back vacation plans, or you keep the car another year. If you don't notice what you give, it is just charity. The spiritual benefits come when you realize that you are giving something up for the benefit of others.

Charitable giving of our excess is vital, no doubt. But if it just fills us with sentimental feelings of having done good, while nothing has changed in our lives, we might become convinced that we have done our part. But we haven't.

Jesus is very specific about this, that giving of our poverty is superior to giving of our abundance. Giving out of our excess is icing, it is nice and appreciated, truly, but it is not doing anything for the giver (That's a paradox, isn't it)? Giving out of our poverty is an act of faith. Faith that it will be ok. Not that God will fill in the budget gap your prodigal giving created, but faith that you will be ok no matter how much you give. (I have yet to see a mainline Protestant give themselves out of house and home). That is an act of faith. It is in God's hands. I'm going to be

ok regardless. I don't know about you, but I'd give/give up a lot to really believe that. Practices of giving allow us to practice that.

You have a big pile of cookies sitting in front of you. I like really thin chocolate chip cookies with the sugars nearly caramelized. A big plate of them. And a friend stops by and I give them one. That's nice. Or I make an extra plate of them for the bake sale. Lovely. Thank you. That's great. OR, I have one last cookie that I have been looking forward to all morning. And the kids come home from school and I cut the cookie into quarters and we each have a little bit. Which one is better for you? (Cholesterol numbers aside).

When we give ex nihilo, that is out of nothing, we can stoke our faith in so many ways. "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how." If we truly believe that this all comes from God, we can rely on God and give freely. Or if we want to believe it all comes from God, and that faith will see us through, well, here is a chance to practice this. Because sometimes seed falls on the path, sometimes on thin soil, sometimes amongst the thorns... but sometimes, seed falls onto good soil and brings "forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."

For some of us, we are giving our widows mite. The \$5 we give each week means we give something else up. God bless you in your faith. Some of us have a ways to go. And this isn't all church giving... giving to neighbors in need, local service providers, organizations whose mission we support, even political figures whose moral character reflects our own values, all forms of giving, of self-sacrifice can serve to cultivate our faith that not only God will provide, but that we will be just fine with whatever we have, even if we are a little less than perfectly comfortable at all times or can afford to have basically anything we want whenever we want it.

So be it giving a simple bow at the mention of Jesus' name during the Mass, a practice of mindfulness, of paying attention, or committing to come to church every week even if the skiing is good, or to serve in the Sunday school, though you'd rather hear the sermon, or deliver Thanksgiving baskets, though you have your own pies to bake, or work towards an actual tithe, ten percent of your earnings when you have competing financial commitments... all of the practices that we do, small and significant, serve to remind us of what, in our best moments, we remember to be most important: that is God, in Christ, with the Holy Spirit, and that space between I and Thou in which the mystery of faith calls out our very best. May it be so. AMEN.