

## **Sermon: Finding Our Balance**

Year B, Proper 27

[Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17; Psalm 127; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44](#)

Offered November 8, 2015 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

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So who would you rather be? A scribe or a poor widow? It's church. We totally know what we're supposed to pick. And honestly, who would choose to be a hypocrite, to pretend to be concerned about what God is calling us to do but really enjoy the perks of being an important person in the community? And yes, get good seats and be held in esteem. So, yeah, sign us up to be poor widows.

But slow it down. Be honest. Your kid comes to you and says she wants to be a pro-soccer player or he wants to be a rock and roll musician. It's where they're happiest. It's what they were meant to be. You don't have to say anything here, don't nod your head or anything. But in your heart of hearts, wouldn't you try to talk them out of it? It's only lucrative to be a professional athlete or musician if you're at the absolute top of the pile. And so few make it to the top of the pile. For everyone else, it's just so hard to make a living. We may not want our kids to be rich, but no one wants their kid to be poor.

And being a widow? Well there are some widows and widowers here. I think they would tell you even now it's pretty tough. Back then, having no man to stand up for you meant that you starved. To death. So she's showing incredible trust by putting two small coins, her only coins, into the Temple treasury. You can say she's trusting in God, because of course she is. But she's also trusting in her community to make sure she has what is required to live. And she's trusting in her community to make sure that her two coins are well spent. As she looks around, she has to see the hypocrites as well, maybe even better than Jesus does. And she puts them in anyway.

So ok, we don't really want to be a poor widow. But we don't want to be hypocrites either. We don't want to devour widows' houses or say long prayers we don't really mean. Again, if we slow it down and we're honest, probably the people who were the scribes back then didn't plan to be hypocrites either. They had jobs to do and they thought they were doing them pretty well. Or as well as they could be done.

So are those all the choices in this story? Well, there are the rich people who are putting in large sums. There have been some articles recently that were talking about modern philanthropy. There's a argument going around that if you really want to change the world, end poverty, eliminate a disease, help the homeless, get a great job on Wall St. and make a *ton* of money. The more you make, the more you can give away. So maybe being a rich person putting in large sums isn't so bad, although Jesus does contrast them with the widow and she comes out ahead.

There are also the disciples. Again, it's church, so we know that we're supposed to see ourselves as Jesus' disciples. But what are they actually doing in this story? They're listening to Jesus and looking at what he's showing them. There's a Christmas cactus in my office that Sue Laub provided. I accepted it on condition I wasn't responsible for it because I can barely keep fake plants from dying. I had been staring at it for at least 30 minutes on and off before she arrived and cooed over the flower buds. I had to have a plant person show me something that was right in front of my eyes. Part of being Jesus' disciple is seeing what he is showing us and living differently because of it.

Finally, there's Jesus in this story. I know. It's church. No grown up is going to say they want to be Jesus. If you teach Sunday School, there are whole classrooms of kids who want to be Jesus. But somewhere along the line, we figure out that Jesus is a goal beyond our ability to grasp. It's easier to be professional athletes and musicians. In this story, he's sitting in a crowded and busy court and he's noticing things. The people whom everyone filters out, he zooms right in on.

So who do we want to be? We want to be a balance of all of them. We want to trust like the widow. We want to work diligently like the scribes, though with more self-awareness. We want to give from our abundance like the rich people. We want to listen and see like the disciples. We want to pick out the details of God's Kingdom when it's happening right in front of our eyes like Jesus.

Today we're kicking off our stewardship campaign, where we pay more attention to the gifts that we have been given and we work as a community to make sure that the church that follows Christ's mission has the foundation of financial support it needs for the coming year. We'll get together after worship and have lunch and get a sense of how much money we need to raise to have this church be as financially healthy next year as it is this year. And isn't it a relief to hear that we are speaking from a position of financial health?

You sent me to a clergy convocation a few weeks ago, allowing me to spend time with my clergy colleagues and with a nationally renowned expert on preaching. It was an incredible opportunity and I am so, so grateful to have gone. Karoline Lewis was simply inspiring. Her approach to biblical preaching is leading me to ask for a fancy Bible that has Greek and English together so I can get better at reading the original text. Being with my colleagues let me see into the lives of other New Hampshire churches and catch a glimpse of what they were up to. It was a gift that your generous support of this church gave me and I'm incredibly grateful.

And since we were not the only ones who have financial needs, at the convocation, I heard a lot of casual conversation about stewardship. Catered luncheons and talent shows. About which Sunday The Committee had picked for the minister to preach the Stewardship Sermon. Of course those were from larger churches with much greater needs, much larger congregations. I didn't wish we had any of those things. But it did make me reflect.

No one asked me to preach a Stewardship Sermon. But they wanted to be sure that we had a service of Loss and Remembrance that was as beautiful and moving as we could make it. They wanted to be sure that our service with the Blessing of the Animals reached as many people as possible. When Patricia Baker's funeral came up, people asked me to make it as special for her family as we could. Some of you gave up time to come and help make people welcome in their time of loss. Those are all actions of scribes who have not forgotten what it means to serve the Kingdom of God. That's finding our balance.

When I got to church last week, everyone wanted to tell me about the Senior Luncheon. There were so many people! We had to get out more and more tables! Everyone pitched in, helping deliver and clear the turkey dinners. The table was overflowing with canned goods for the Food Pantry. We didn't run out of food, of course, everyone hurried to reassure me. But slow that down and be honest. Look at that story the way we look at Holy Scripture. More than 70 people left fed. Think of the canned goods that crossed the street to the Food Pantry. Way more than 70 people. Think of all the raw ingredients that went into that meal. All of them were donated. Think of all the cooking and carving. Think of all the decorating and hospitality that went into

that. Think of all the dishes that needed to be washed. Talk about giving from abundance like the wealthy people in today's Scripture. That's finding our balance.

At my Installation, the one comment I got over and over and over again was how good New Beginnings is. It was surprise bordering on shock. Now, I agree. They are awesome. But somewhere in those comments was a tinge of "what is a little church like Brookline doing with a great band like New Beginnings?" That I can answer. A little church like Brookline is asking people to use their gifts and talents to listen to what Jesus teaches and to look where he is pointing. For the band, who rehearses many more Sundays than they perform, Jesus is asking us to bring our best to God and to the community. New Beginnings is only one place where that happens, think of the Sunday School lessons, and cradle roll and grocery shopping. Heck, Clyde Ferrell mows our lawn all summer. There is a kind of discipleship that flourishes here precisely because we are a small church and we are willing to look where Jesus is pointing and make sure that other people see where Jesus is pointing as well. That's finding our balance.

Are we like Jesus in the story, pointing out the people that everyone skips over? With 72 hours of being asked, I was able to let the leader of a women's Alcoholics Anonymous group which had grown so much that they needed a new space to meet in that we would be honored to have them meet here on Monday nights. You can call it recovery from addiction. Or you can call it casting out demons. The name won't make a difference to the women who will gather here. But the support that they experience together will change lives. That's finding our balance.

While I won't share much, but I can assure you that because you give me a building to work in and a phone to answer, I have had people come asking to be seen. You have given me the time and the resources to sit with them and remind them of the simple truths that Jesus taught – that they are beloved children of God, that they always have been and always will be. That nothing can separate them from the love of God. Because you support me, I can support them when they are deep in struggle. That's finding our balance.

The Finance Committee has worked very hard to put together a faithful budget for next year. And by Finance Committee I mean Ron Long. Joining him was Rena as Treasurer and Sanjay as Moderator. To get a budget together, we pulled in the whole Cabinet, the Deacons, all of Outreach. The Trustees know we have some big tasks in front of us and they've reached out well beyond this congregation for advice. I grabbed Ann Desrochers for all sorts of consultation. Carol as the head of fundraising and as the secretary had to make guesses about toner cartridges and church fairs more than a year away. Pretty much everyone but Moxie has contributed to the budget. All that work comes together so that we have some idea how much we need to be able to raise to be the church we think God is calling us to be.

Jesus saw that widow putting her last two coins into the Treasury and he called her out. Think of the trust she must have in God and in her community. Having paid more attention to All Saints Day than to a Stewardship Sunday, having fed the masses on a Saturday afternoon, having sung our hearts out, having sheltered some very broken hearts and some healing lives, we're trying to find one last element to keep our balance. We trust that the community we are a part of will help find the resources to support the budget they helped to create.

No one asked me to preach a Stewardship sermon. And really how could they? Look at all the Stewardship sermons that have already been preached. All the music offered, all the kids taught, all the meals served and taken home. Those are all Stewardship sermons and they are much better than anything I could say about giving money to the church.

But I'll say it anyway. You have pledge forms in your bulletins. The simplest option is to write your name and check the box to pledge 10% more in 2016 than you did in 2015. If we all did that, we would be well on our way. Not all of us can do that, so some of us will have to give more. We're trusting each other that we will take care of each other and take care of this church. It's a balance that we're all finding together.