

Sermons at Christ Church

Reaching Out In Faith.

Pentecost 25

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Digging Deep. The prophet Elijah arrives at the gates of Zarephat and sees a widow gathering sticks to cook a meal. The prophet calls out to her and requests water from her. But before she's completely out of his sight, he calls her again and makes an additional request-add a loaf of bread to the water.

The surprised widow then responds, I have nothing baked yet, but I have some small flour and oil, my plan is to bake for my son and I, so we can eat and die. How desperate can life be? That was all that she had. But in spite of her desperate situation, this widow dug deep and shared the little that she had. She may have had scarce resources but she was abundant in compassion.

Today's gospel tells another story of a widow who was one of many worshippers who put money in the offering plate at the temple. The rich gave and so did she. She gave her two coins. Those coins were all that she had. And she gave all of it. Jesus singles her out and lifts her up as an example of giving-an example of digging deep. .

Jesus condemns the Scribes and the Pharisees who also gave but whose giving was to show off and to gain prominence. That isn't what digging deep is about. To dig deep is to look at what the widow who relies on the benevolence of others to survive did in the temple-she dug deep and gave her all. The point of the story is not so much about what each person is offering, but whether you are digging deep.

From these two stories we gather that to give, to dig deep, has nothing to do with abundance. We dig deep and give because we believe it is important to honor God with our gifts. We do not give because we have disposable income, we give because we can dig deep, and digging deep may hurt sometimes but it means you are being authentic.

Scripture speaks about widows a lot because widows were one of the vulnerable in society. Being a woman was challenging in that world and even in today's world. And being a widow was a double challenge because many of these women didn't benefit from any life insurance policy. They lived at the mercy of family or society.

When my father passed away, my mother was left a young widow. There was no life policy and she didn't really have a job, so you can imagine. I can fill pages and pages of the injustice and maltreatment my mother had to endure. My mother, like many widows, lived at the mercy of an unforgiving and semi-compassionate society. My mother, like many widows, had to dig deep to survive and take care of their children. And all through those difficult years till today, she's always digging deep to share the little she has with someone who has nothing.

We dig deep, not because we have in abundance, we dig deep because we have run out, we have our last flour and oil but we can see those who have nothing. We dig deep because something is inviting us to go much further than we would want to go. We dig deep because we want to reject hate. We dig deep because something is inviting us to give more than we want to give. We dig deep because we want to touch the very bottom of our pockets and purses. We dig deep because we want to be reflective in our decision making process. We dig deep because we want to be in touch with our own humanity and touch the very bottom of our souls if possible.

The past week has been difficult on so many levels for millions of people. And I can understand the pain, hurt, disappointment, frustration and sadness that people genuinely feel. For so many of our people, it is as if we take one step forward and two steps backwards. The progress that they want to see isn't manifesting itself in ways that we can embrace.

To understand, we have to dig deep and accept what the human story is about. We don't make progress in leaps and bounds. Progress is frustratingly slow, painfully slow. And more often than not, when you are invested in a particular issue or you want progress, you have to dig deep in order to deal with the frustrations that come with the burden of progress. The temptation is that we may want to lose hope because of our frustrations. But you can't lose hope. We have to believe in the process even if the process doesn't produce the results that we want.

There's a famous fable of the scorpion and the frog. One of my friends whom I rave about shared the story with me. A scorpion wanted to cross a river but cannot swim, so it asked a frog to carry it across. The frog hesitates, afraid that the scorpion might sting it, but the scorpion promises not to, pointing out that it would drown if it killed the frog in the middle of the river. The frog considers the scorpion's argument as being sensible and reasonable and agrees to transport the scorpion across the river. Midway across the river, the scorpion stings the frog anyway, dooming both of them. The dying frog asks the scorpion why it stung despite knowing the consequence, to which the scorpion replies: "I am sorry, but I couldn't help myself. It's my character."

See, the frog dug deep. The frog went deep within itself to provide the scorpion the help that it needed. The frog gave the scorpion all that it had-its life. But the character of the scorpion was enough to overlook the goodwill of the frog. It stung and killed the frog and himself.

Are you the frog or the scorpion? Are you one whose character resembles that of the Scribes and the Pharisees, the scorpions of Jesus' time? Or are you the frog who gives his all and her all in service to those who can even hurt themselves?

The letter to the Hebrews remind us that the one sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ was in effect a maturing of the yearly sacrifice by the high priest. To offer himself as the sacrificial lamb, Jesus had to dig deep. He had to go deep within himself and reject all the opportunities that were available for him to walk away. But he did not walk away. His was not about an abundance of strength or power but a humble acceptance of God's will. Remember when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane, as the dawn closed in on him, and danger kept knocking on his door, when his friends were sleeping, his prayer was "*Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.*"

To do the will of God, you have to dig deep. This reminds me of the prophet's promise to the widow of Zarephat who was invited to do the will of God. *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.*"

To dig deep doesn't come easy. It is part of our growth process, it is a kind of maturing that paves the way for us to live authentic lives-all our lives become giving our all without holding back. We dig deep because we value authenticity and when we dig deep, we stay in touch with everything that makes us unique.

When we live authentic lives, we don't take things for granted, we are fueled by a deep sense of gratitude-the kind which allows us to ground ourselves in humility so we can give in humility like the widow in the temple. To dig deep means becoming true to ourselves and avoiding the trappings of pretensions and pomposity because we dare to give our all-even when we do not have the resources ourselves.

Last winter, a parishioner called me with the story of a desperate woman who had been sleeping in her car at a Walmart parking lot because she walked out of an abusive marriage. After many days at the parking lot, all she wanted that evening was a place to lay her head and take a warm shower. How desperate can life be? Even though this parishioner wasn't in the position to offer the help that the woman needed, she reached out to me and I was able to put her in a hotel for a few days.

To dig deep is to give it your all. It is not about holding back. It is about giving with a hope mingled with fear-the fear is that you are not terribly sure if the promise of the prophet will come to pass but you give anyway. To dig deep is to give your all because you believe in God, the trusted giver.

To dig deep is to seek God's glory in your life. And to dig deep in giving is an expression of gratitude, and it doesn't matter how much you give because whatever you give comes from your authentic self.

We honor all veterans on this Veterans Day weekend. Our veterans did dig deep. Our veterans gave their all. And we celebrate them because of the sacrifice of giving without counting the cost.

Like a veteran, can you also dig deep? Can you offer a heart that yields to an authentic life encased in gratitude or a heart that is absorbed in his or her own self-righteous hypocrisy like the scribes and Pharisees?

Someone once said that if we live long enough and deep enough, gratitude and authenticity becomes a way of life because we have embraced digging deep as our way of life. Go ahead, my friend and dig deep. You will see the glory of God. **Amen.**