

St. Barnabas' Church  
Sermon for 25B Pentecost, Proper 27  
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### Seen by Jesus

Is today's Gospel lesson about stewardship? Are we to use the widow as a lesson in extraordinary sacrificial giving, and is it meant to encourage us to do the same. I don't think so.

What about justice? When we hear the word "widow" in the Bible it should conger up that most basic of social commands that appears again and again in the Old Testament, to care for the widow and the orphan," those who had no social network in the form of a husband or family to care for them. It's worth noting that the Hebrew word for "widow" connotes one who is silent, which is an indication of how little power she really had. Left out of the prospect of inheritance by law, widows are a symbol of the exploited and oppressed. If she is "silent," in the eyes of the law at least, her offering was not. Offerings were received in trumpet-shaped contraptions that echoed the sound of the offering. Her pitiful offering was heard loud and clear.

Jesus is in the temple, and this is the last in a long line of confrontations with the religious authorities. This time it's with the scribes, and if there's anyone who ought to know about caring for the widow, its the scribes, who were among the very few who could read the Torah, and write. So an easy reading might be to condemn their showy religious practices and to praise the faithful widow. But there's a problem with that too. The social and economic structures make her completely unable to provide for herself, and rather than fix that, we raise her up in praise. I don't think Jesus is doing this. He is calling attention to the injustice in a world where some people give much less than they should, where the burdens fall unfairly, and most heavily, on the most vulnerable. The church – particularly the church -- is supposed to care about that.

There's more here though. What is this story telling us about Jesus? What is Jesus doing? "Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins,..." Jesus calls his disciples and points her out to them. So the first thing that happens is that Jesus sees her.<sup>1</sup>

This is no small thing, that this woman, largely invisible to her society, without power, without much use by some calculations, is noticed by Jesus. This may be the first and most important lesson to the disciples, to notice someone, particularly, those whom society would not see.

And it is not just seeing a person, and not just seeing their situation. It is seeing them in the truth of their own full personhood.

A couple of days ago was the 80th anniversary of *Kristallnacht*, "the night of the broken glass," the night when Nazi persecution of their Jewish neighbors became more intense and systemic. The problem wasn't that the Jews were invisible, it is that they were seen as less than human.

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<sup>1</sup>David Lose, "In the Meantime," blogpost for 25B Pentecost at [www.davidlose.net](http://www.davidlose.net)

Once we de-humanize someone, we can do whatever we want. We can say whatever we want. This is a profound moral failing, the failure to see another person as fully a child of God.<sup>2</sup>

And, we do it all the time. We are in a time in our common life when people seem to feel at liberty to say the worst possible things to each other. One apparently irresistible forum for hate speech is Twitter. So much so that it is causing some people to say “what is going on?!!” What is it with this epidemic of hate speech? And it comes from all sides.

Sally Kohn, a progressive columnist and commentator for CNN, also for a time on Fox News, has written a book called *The Opposite of Hate: A Field Guide to Repairing Our Humanity*<sup>3</sup>. In it she confronts her own challenge with Twitter trolls, and also honestly confronts her own shameful moments that have given rise to her own hate-filled thoughts. The book is rich with insight, but there is one angle that speaks directly to how we perceive each other. She started with her own “trolls,” people who berate and belittle others on the internet. She receives hate-filled threats like “@sallykohn looks like a good place for a bullet to me.” Or another “you are worse than ISIS; you are truly one of the most hate-filled individuals in this country.” This would happen even when she would post a picture of her dog in the park. She began to wonder if people were just naturally mean, and that it was simply that Twitter gave people something to hide behind. So she decided to contact her trolls directly and see what she could find out. What she did find surprised her.

Some of them didn’t want to talk, but some did. She found that most were not only civil to her but rather nice. She realized that she herself “had been thinking of them as either robots or monsters—anything but human.” (P. 18). Talking to leading researchers, scientists and psychologists led her to conclude that “deeper forces were shaping those contradictions [of being nice in person and hateful on Twitter]—and that these are contradictions we all contain.” (19).

There is a human tendency that is so common it has a name: it is called “attribution error.” It goes like this. Most of us think we’re basically nice people. When we behave badly, we don’t see that as evidence of our nature, but rather, that we were provoked to behave in ways we don’t normally behave, or say things we don’t normally say. So when we call someone names, we think we’re just being blunt and honest, and therefore, not uncivil. When we perceive meanness in an other, an enemy, an adversary, or someone who is different from us, we see their meanness as who they are. My meanness is situational; her meanness is because she is naturally mean.

Yes, this is enabled by anonymous on-line platforms like Twitter, but that is too easy an out. Because even if I don’t tweet it, I can still think it.

I am persuaded that this is a current example in our common life of something that is a common human failing, and a central Christian teaching: the failure to see another as a child of God, as a human being worthy of our respect. In our private life, it is The temptation to take someone who has made us angry, has hurt us, or simply disagrees with us, and conclude that they are naturally defective, as in “oh he’s just a you know what.

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<sup>2</sup> Lose.

<sup>3</sup> (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2018).

In our public life, there is the tendency to not simply ignore others but to view them as fearful, even subhuman. Code language is calling someone an animal. Whether it's the migrant caravan, the drug addict in prison, those trapped in poverty, the person of another ethnic or sexual group, the gospel command and the promise, the law and the gospel, is that Jesus sees them, just as Jesus sees us. And perhaps that's where it all starts: That in the midst of our own failures, the ways in which we let ourselves down, our own pain and woundedness, God's promise is to see us, you and me, as full persons, made in God's image, fearfully and wonderfully made, to see our true selves. I need to hear that, and so do you, and so does someone out there. In being reminded of our blessedness, God lifts us up, and equips us as beloved children of God to go forth and proclaim that same Good News to others. AMEN.