The Rev. Monica Whitaker

Selfless giving.

“A poor widow came and put in two small coins, which are worth a penny.”

Today’s Gospel reading is often referred to as “The Widow’s Mite” or The Widow’s Offering.” Our Bibles seem to offer such subtitles in order to point us toward a theology of selfless giving. As if God had placed the widow in this challenging position to be an example for others to give more than they could. As if Jesus would want to support the Temple hierarchy’s fraudulent practices of embezzling funds from sacrificial offerings; to see the funds used to dress scribes in fancy robes rather than those for whom they were initially intended – the widows, orphans, immigrants, poor, and sick. As if we who saw her selfless act, or listened to this story would be inspired to give more to our faith community out of guilt-ridden gratitude that God did not place us in the undesirable position of being a poor widow. But is that who we imagine God to be? Is that whom we imagine Jesus to be? Is that who we imagine this woman to be?

Who is this woman whom Jesus notices but only speaks about and does nothing to change her precarious situation? Who is this poor widow? Perhaps like me, you have imagined her to be elderly and bent over, with dark-colored ragged clothing. Perhaps she has been a widow for many years and has now
completely run out of money. There is no mention of a son in her life, or any other family members. She is alone in her household – if she even has a home. She is alone in her community because without a man to take care of her, she is nothing. She is alone in her house of worship because no one wants to speak with her, no one wants to help her, no one wants to acknowledge her presence. It’s inconvenient and uncomfortable for other people to be near her in public – as if her condition of being poor or a widow were contagious. Who is this woman whose faithfulness brings her to the temple despite being scoffed at, shunned, and ignored? Is she as old as we presume? Is she as physically disabled as we imagine? Or is she young and unable to bear a child, and therefore unsuitable for re-marriage? Did her husband leave her without a social or financial support system? Was she forced to beg for food and shelter in exchange for whatever was asked of her? Who was this poor widow?

In reflecting on today’s reading I came across several interpretations of this scene by painters, who, over the centuries, usually imagined the poor widow in one of two ways: either aged and frail, or younger and carrying a child. But the scripture does not mention her age, nor does it mention her carrying a child in her arms, or in her womb. So perhaps, the widow was young and full of life. And perhaps she was not remarried because she was thought to be barren. What use then was she to society? Normative cultural practices would be to ignore her, or give her a few coins out of pity or guilt. Most likely
she was shunned and unable to find meaningful work. Most likely she was betrayed as one of their own community. Most likely she was condemned to die by a culture that stoned her with their hardened hearts, whipped her with their sideways glances, and cut her with their sharp words. They might as well have raised her up on a cross and used her as an example of what not to become. What better way to punish someone who shed light on the sinfulness of the wider culture? Betrayal. Condemnation, Crucifixion.

In focusing our attention on the widow, we can see her as being an integral part of the culture that Jesus is re-forming through his teaching and preaching. And that he will re-form through his own sacrificial giving on the cross. Just as this widow is being raised up by society as someone whom no one would want to be, so too will Jesus be raised up as an example and a threat for what not to become - someone who challenges the status quo and questions unscrupulous practices of the imperial regime and religious elite. In seeing this widow as someone who remained faithful until she had nothing else to give, perhaps she foreshadows the faithfulness of Jesus as he continues to journey toward the cross. In this way, we may see the widow as a Christ-like figure; someone who perseveres despite betrayal and suffering; someone who will most likely die at the hands of a fearful, apathetic, and judgmental society.

It is remarkable that within the past few decades contemporary artists have created other ways of envisioning who is a Christ-like figure. Who has
society crucified in thought, word, and deed? Sometimes it is the poor. Sometimes it is women. Sometimes it is immigrants. Sometimes it is our LGBTQ family members. Which begs the question: Where do we see Christ in our everyday lives and as we offer devotions to the One who spoke us into being?

Back in 1980s, the granddaughter of Winston Churchill reflected on the theology of *imago Dei*; the theology from the Book of Genesis that reminds us that we are all made in the image of God. In combining the theology of *imago Dei* and the concept of the feminine divine, British artist, Edwina Sandys, created the controversial figure of *Christa* – a 250-pound bronze sculpture of a bare-breasted woman on a translucent acrylic cross.¹ In 1984, her work of art was to be displayed at an exhibition in New York City's Cathedral of St. John the Divine. But soon after it had been installed, there was significant backlash, and the top religious authority in the diocese demanded that it be removed. What was it about this sculpture that offended people? Was it her gender? Was it her age? Was it that this mostly naked figure called out the ways in which society objectifies, sexualizes, and body shames women? Was it that she was as young and healthy as Jesus was when he was crucified?

Just two years ago, *Christa* was brought back to the cathedral to be hung up not as a work of art, but as an object of devotion over an altar. This time, the

bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New York approved of the installation and encouraged visitors to sit with this woman and acknowledge all of the challenges it raises for us about who God is in the world and in our lives.

He wrote, “I pray that we may see in Christa that there is nothing of the lives and experience of women that is not known to God, and indeed is not woven all the way through our dear Jesus. . .that that great wound across the human family, that wound which is the suffering and abuse of women and girls, was also. . .lifted before God from the cross by the self-offering of Christ; lifted in and from Christ’s very person and being.”

This feminine Christ-like image invites viewers to see the divine as manifested in every person—across all genders, races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and abilities—and especially those who are most vulnerable and difficult to be seen. Is fixing our gaze upon a feminine Christ-like image any less challenging than fixing our gaze upon an abused spouse? Or an immigrant mother? Or an adolescent commodified for human trafficking?

Who is this crucified woman? She is the poor widow whose faithfulness draws her closer to God; whose selfless giving points toward Christ whose wounds not only reveal the violence and brokenness of humanity, but also the resurrected life in which we all hope for and share.

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2 https://happylutheran.blog/2017/02/05/the-christa-project/