

Just a Couple of Copper Coins

Proper 27, Year B – Mark 12:38-44

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, November 11, 2012

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Oh, *sure*, now that we've pretty much finished our Operating Fund campaign for this year, we draw one of the classic stewardship texts from the Gospels. Actually, there are a couple of folks out there, I'm told, who still haven't turned in their little blue card. But today happens to have another meaning, for me as for *many* of us – today happens to be Veterans' Day. So rather than a stewardship sermon, my thinking about the woman who gave two small copper coins went a whole 'nother direction this week.

One of the joys that I have rediscovered in living in a small town (one joy of many, I am happy to say) is the unapologetic streak of patriotism that can still be found in Henderson. A couple of weeks ago, I got a personal, hand written note from South Middle Schooler, Destiny Littlepage inviting me to be part of the big Veterans' Day ceremony tomorrow. I am looking forward to being part of what promises to be a wonderful commemoration of the men and women who have defended the values, and yes, the interests, of our great nation, the men and women who have fought the wars and conflicts of our lifetime, and who have, too often, died in the struggle to keep us the free people we are.

But whenever this time of the year rolls around, I have to confess that I don't usually think of all that on such a grand scale. Instead, I usually remember a single veteran from the desert of Saudi Arabia, a young man that I remember only as "Tommy."

My involvement in the conflict variously known as the "First Gulf War" or "Iraq I" or "Desert Storm" was as a pusher of papers, rather than a leader of soldiers. I was what for *most* of my Army career, I called a "staff wienie." My duties during the war as the Medical Plans Officer for the XVIII Airborne Corps Surgeon generally confined me to a tangibly tight triangle that included my cot, a cluster of briefing rooms at the Corps Headquarters, and my assigned corner of a big green table that sat in a big green tent that was pitched inside a big green building outside the not at *all* green town of Rahfa. The Surgeon staff wienies shared this glorious piece of real estate with the Chaplain wienies, the Judge Advocate General wienies, and the personnel wienies, and none of us saw much beyond our edges of our big green tables.

Tommy, on the other hand, got to do a *lot* of traveling. A young soldier carrying the unexalted rank of Specialist Fourth Class, Tommy belonged to the Engineer Brigade and by virtue of his skill set or his personality or both, he had been selected for the *sometimes* exciting but mostly unenviable job of driving one of the Engineer company commanders. As the assigned driver of one of the few vehicles in that unit that went "vroom-vroom" rather than "clankety-clank," it ended up being Tommy's job to bring in the unit's daily reports to the big green tent where I spent most of my time with the other wienies. At a certain time of the morning, there was a stream of such couriers in and out of our little area, most in a big hurry to get in and get out. But nearly every day when Tommy brought *his* reports, he would stop and engage someone in seemingly idle chat while others came and went, until someone would invite him to use one of the phones that, in those pre-cell-phone days, were technically there only for emergency calls back to the States.

Because those phones were on the big green table next to my green table, over time, I got a chance to know Tommy from his nearly daily assurances to his mother that he was doing fine, and from the times he spent his rationed two minutes hunched over the phone, giggling into the receiver to someone that he once blushing admitted was his "girl back home."

About 48 hours into what turned out to be only a hundred hours of actual ground combat, we got word in the middle of the night that, while trying to decide how to defuse an Iraqi landmine, seven members of one of the Engineer companies had been killed when it went off: the company commander

and the First Sergeant, one of the lieutenants, three junior sergeants, and the company commander's driver. The next day, the Theater replacement detachment sent up an Engineer captain and lieutenant, four sergeants that were qualified to fill the vacant positions, and three Specialists Fourth Class, from which the unit could select... a replacement for Tommy.

When we were all home again, they planted a small grove of trees at Fort Bragg in honor of those men. For years, and perhaps still, at this time of the year, that Engineer Brigade remembers their fallen comrades with a ceremony in that little grove of trees. If I ever knew the names of the others, I certainly don't remember them now. And, you know what? I'm sorry, but I have to admit that I really don't care all that much. I remember Tommy.

You see, it's one thing to stand in front of the National World War II Memorial or the Korean Memorial or Wall in Washington or at any of the thousands of monuments that dot city parks and town squares across the country. It's one thing to read line after line of names of the fallen in the wars of this decade, and the past century, and the century before that. It's one thing to think about and celebrate the tens of thousands of soldiers who have lost their lives in wars, and in conflicts, and in "police actions," and in peacekeeping and nation-building operations. It is quite another matter, however, to bring it down to the level of one soldier and his mother who lost her only son.

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges of our own national life is that in our two and a half centuries we have so often given to war out the abundance of our wealth, we have given from our millions of people, we have given out of our seemingly boundless resources. But on an individual basis, those that we remember today, soldier by soldier, family by family, spouse by spouse, mother by mother, often gave *all* that they had.

Jesus was teaching his disciples in the Temple, and they *happened* to be near the treasury. He watched the busy people come and go, bringing in their offerings and gifts. Then one giver stood out for him, dropping into the collection two small copper coins, hardly worth a penny.

"Look there," Jesus said to his disciples, "Did you see that?" "All of those people giving so much to the Temple are doing a good thing. By doing what they're supposed to do, their generosity will go a long way, but they aren't going to miss what they have given.

"But that one, that widow over there, look at *her*." "Do you understand?" he said, "Those two copper coins are all she had, and she gave them trusting that God is still good."

What a stewardship sermon! But today happens to be Veterans Day. Tomorrow I am honored to have been invited to be part of our small town's annual remembrance out at South Middle School. No doubt we will remember politicians, and capital cities, and armies, and generals. But I hope we will also remember all the copper coins, the sons, the daughters, the brothers and sisters, the husbands and wives and boyfriends, who may not seem like much in the grand scheme of nations and power, but were the very *best* that we had to offer. Thanks be to God that, so far, it has been enough.

Me? I'll be thinking of Tommy. And maybe that *does* have something to do with stewardship.