



“ALL IN”
SCRIPTURE: 1 KINGS 17: 8-16; MARK 12: 38-44
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
November 11, 2018
The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor

1 Kings 17:8-16

17:8 Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying,

17:9 "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you."

17:10 So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink."

17:11 As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand."

17:12 But she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die."

17:13 Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son.

17:14 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."

17:15 She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days.

17:16 The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Mark 12:38-44

12:38 As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,

12:39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!

12:40 They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

12:41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums.

12:42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.

12:43 Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.

12:44 For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

(Walk out to front of chancel)

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. (pace in front of the chancel)

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. (pace out into the congregation down center aisle)

Cell number 8 was five feet wide and seven feet long.

Cell number 8 on death row in Holman State Prison, Atmore, Alabama.

Five feet wide. Seven feet long.

Thirty years.

That's how long Anthony Ray Hinton was caged in that five feet wide, seven feet long cell, for a crime he didn't commit.

As a black man in Alabama, Ray was seen as disposable by the justice system—despite clear evidence of his innocence and an alibi, he was convicted of murder and sentenced to death.

Race and poverty make this an even more dangerous world for people like Ray Hinton.

And perhaps one of the most damning aspects of this unevenly distributed vulnerability in our country, is the fact that there are people who build their wealth on the exploitation of the most vulnerable.

People profit from the prison industrial complex that keeps people incarcerated who can't afford the price of freedom in this country—the price of good lawyers, the price of prolonged appeals processes. People profit from desperate people.

The Bible contradicts itself on many of the big questions people try to say it answers—questions about sexuality, questions about salvation, questions about gender.

But the one thing that the Bible **does not** contradict itself about is how people of faith are mandated to treat the most vulnerable in our society. The Bible does not equivocate about economic justice and about how the most at risk in society should be the recipients of the most attentive care by people of faith.

Widows provide some of the most vivid iconography of human vulnerability in scripture. Even women of financial means who were widowed were at great risk in early Near Eastern cultures because in a patrilineal society, a woman's legal protections came through her father or her husband. And, so widows and orphans were especially vulnerable in a society that regarded them as less than.

This curious story of Elijah and the Phoenician widow in 1 Kings is actually part two of God's feeding miracles in Elijah's life. First, Elijah was fed by ravens, birds often regarded as symbols of death. And now, in our passage today, Elijah is fed by a woman who was so desperate for adequate food for her and her son, that she was preparing what she believed to be their final meal that day—that day when Elijah said, bring me a drink and give me the morsel of bread in your hand.

And it happened as Elijah said it would—the jar of meal did not run out for days, and all in her household and Elijah were fed.

But before that could happen the woman had to take an important step—she had to trust this stranger. She had to trust a God who was a stranger to her as well.

In her extreme vulnerability, in her despair, Elijah called out to her and invited her to believe. He invited her to take a chance on love.

Ray Hinton spent his first three years on death row angry—and he should have been angry. His court appointed lawyer didn't do his job. Investigators lied. Judges abused their power. People and systems willfully denied and even concealed the truth about his innocence.

We should all be angry about what happened to Ray Hinton.

In his anger, Ray isolated himself. He talked to no one. He quit praying. He pushed his Bible under his bed and didn't crack it open for 3 years.

God wasn't on death row, Ray decided.

After three years of talking to no one, one night, Ray heard another inmate on death row crying. He heard crying a lot on death row—all the time. But this time something happened. Ray got up and started to pace. He could feel something stirring, but he resisted it. "His crying has got nothing to do with me," Ray told himself.¹

Ray let his mind wander to other thoughts—he was pacing. And the Spirit was on the move. As the man cried out again, Ray realized he, too, was crying. He sat down on his bed and started to weep for the man jailed near his cell.

Ray wrote, "I thought again about the choices I didn't have and about freedom, and the man stopped crying and there was a silence that was louder than any noise I'd ever heard... I was on death row not by my own choice...Despair was a choice. Hatred was a choice. Anger was a choice. I still had choices, and that knowledge rocked me. I could choose to give up or hang on. Hope was a choice. Faith was a choice. And more than anything, love was a choice."²

Ray walked up to his cell door and yelled: "Hey! Are you all right over there?"

And in that moment, Ray was set free, right there on death row—free to love, free to hope, free to connect, free to heal and to keep fighting and to not give up.

That night on death row, when the Spirit broke open Ray Hinton's heart, when Ray stepped back from the brink of giving up, of giving in to the things that were trying to break him—that moment didn't just change things for Ray, it changed things for all of the people on death row at Holman State Prison.

"Hey man whatever it is, it's going to be alright. It's going to be ok," Ray said.

Several minutes past before anything else was said. “I just.... I just got word that my mom died,” the man said.

“I’m sorry man. I really am,” Ray said.

Then a voice sounded from a cell downstairs, “Sorry for your loss.”

And another, “Sorry, man. Rest in peace.”

Ray then asked the man to tell him about his mother. And for the next two hours, he listened to stories about a mother who sounded a lot like his mom. “Tough, but full of love.”

“I wasn’t expecting to have my heart break that night,” Ray later wrote. “I wasn’t expecting to end three years of silence. It was a revelation to realize that I wasn’t the only man on death row. I was born with the same gift from God we all are born with—the impulse to reach out and lessen the suffering of another human being. It was a gift and we each had a choice whether to use this gift or not.”³

And Ray got out is Bible that night—and yelled out. “Listen! God may sit high, but he looks low. He’s looking down here in the pit. He’s sitting high, but he’s looking low. You’ve got to believe it.”⁴

Ray’s profound vulnerability as a black man sentenced to death for a crime he did not commit had a ripple effect onto those who loved him. His friend, Lester never missed one visiting day on death row in 30 years—he drove seven hours one way every Friday to be there for his friend. And Ray’s mother never stopped believing her son would come home; she never stopped believing that the lawyers would do the right thing.

Ray’s mother was poor—she barely made enough cleaning houses to pay her light bill and put food on the table every month. But she needed to feel like she was giving her love for Ray everything she had, so, without telling Ray, she sent his court appointed attorney \$25 every time she wrote to plead with him to help her son come home. The same lawyer who responded to Ray, when Ray told him he was innocent, “Listen, all y’all are always doing something and saying you are innocent.”⁵

Ray’s lawyer took his mother’s \$25 every time she sent it. After years of delayed appeals, his lawyer told him he could only continue if Ray paid him \$15,000. When Ray called his office and asked how he thought they were supposed to get that kind of money. The response was, “Can’t you just ask your mom to mortgage her house.”⁶

Jesus was teaching his disciples in his critical gaze of the scribes not just to see hypocrisy, but to also be able to spot even a worse sin—the sin of being an opportunist at the expense of the most vulnerable.

You see those opportunistic scribes didn't just like to hob knob with the rich and famous, they were cozying up to the widows who had money.

Jesus then watches the big gifts come in with a flourish at the treasury. And then he sees the widow give her two coins—worth nothing but a penny—almost nothing compared to those big gifts others had “thrown” in.

Jesus calls the disciples over. You guys see that poor widow? "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

Now the interesting thing is how this story has been appropriated for a few things—sometimes to romanticize poverty and other times for a kind of institutional opportunism that is troubling if we are paying attention.

Friends, this is a feminist intervention of this story.

While we love to feel all warm and fuzzy about the widow's mite, have we ever thought to ask the question about what kind of institution made her feel like this kind of total sacrifice was expected of her? Why did she give this way? Did she, like Ray's mother, think if she just gave the institution everything she had, they would finally take care of her? How is this a life-giving model for her, for people like her? What does it really mean to be “all-in” in a world of such gross inequity? What does it really mean to be “all-in” when it comes to provoking justice and equity in our communities and in our own lives?

This narrative that the widow has been held captive to by institutional Christianity—this narrative of sacrificial giving, may have done more to entrench our own captivities than it has to teach us about the freedom Jesus wants us to have.

If you read closely, Jesus never really says what she does is just or good or right. The story of the widow's two coins is coupled with a story of institutional opportunism after all. Jesus leaves the moral of the story dangling at the end of his trip to the treasury.

The story of Ray Hinton who found a way to make life on death row, the story of the widow preparing her own death row meal for her and her son, the story of Ray's mother who would do anything to have her son come home again, and the story of the widow who gave all the money she had to the church treasury—these are all

stories of vulnerability, these are all stories about power—our power and God’s power.

And these are stories about captivity and freedom and the truth that can set us free.

There is a lot we don’t know about the widow at the treasury. We don’t know what happened to her to bring her to that moment of truth when she gave away all she had. And we don’t know what happened to her after she took this bold step. Did the community that had tolerated her poverty decide they had to do better by her?

There is a lot we don’t know, but there is one thing we do know about this woman, she wasn’t captive to her money. Jesus said she gave out of her poverty. Can you see it, Grace Covenant? She gave out of her power, too. She’s not captive to the same things that stop us from being real with each other.

Her captivity perhaps rested in a very different place than her lack of financial resources—she needed a family, she needed a community that would help her make a life that was about more than survival. She was ready for a change—and she came to her faith community to say—I need to trust you with all of who I am, I need to believe that we can find a better way to live together.

With the good news of this woman’s powerful model of freedom and vulnerability, comes the difficult truth that we don’t know whether her community joined her in her bold step—to be vulnerable, and to be free. Did her community repent and trust each other enough to find a new way to be together?

In 2015 when he was released, the 30 years he spent on death row had exceeded the years Ray spent free before he was wrongly accused at age 29.

And Ray’s freedom also came 27 years earlier, the day he decided to not give up on love in a place many could mistake as God forsaken. And with the good news of the freedom Ray found, comes the difficult truth of the ease with which our society stole 30 years of someone’s life and almost executed an innocent man.

The freedom to be vulnerable, the freedom to risk loving another, the freedom to hear and to speak the truth, the freedom to trust God in an untrustworthy world, my friends, my siblings in Christ, my faith community, this is the kind of freedom Christ died for us to have.

One. two. three. four. five.

One. two. three. four. five. six. seven.

What is the size of your cell, your captivity? Are you ready for a change?

When you are, Jesus, will meet you there.

“Listen! God may sit high, but he looks low. He’s looking down here in the pit. He’s sitting high, but he’s looking low. You’ve got to believe it.”

Just listen, and you’ll hear Jesus calling you, too, to take a chance on love.

Thanks be to God.

¹ Hinton, Anthony Ray, *The Sun Does Shine: How I Found Life and Freedom on Death Row*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2018), 114.

² Ibid, 115.

³ Ibid, 117.

⁴ Ibid, 116-117.

⁵ Ibid, 56.

⁶ Ibid, 104.