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The Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
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Everything

In this week of momentous decisions and consequences in our national life I cannot stop thinking about a particular place I was privileged to visit once, a place that taught me about the power of faith and resiliency and determination. I was part of an interfaith delegation traveling to Turkey, a group of religious leaders —Christian, Jewish, and Muslim. We traveled there to learn about a part of the world where there is a significant history of people of different faiths living together in relative peace. During the long centuries of Ottoman rule, Jews Christians, and Muslims enjoyed times of mutual friendship and unusual respect for one another's integrity. It was fascinating to be there. So much of Christian history, so much of the bible takes place in what is today Turkey. We were there to learn about the cost and the fragility of peace. The cost of human flourishing.

As part of our trip we visited the Neve Shalom Synagogue in Istanbul. It has been the scene of horrific violence, bombed in 1983 and again in 2003. Scores of people died in both attacks. To enter the Synagogue today, you have to walk down a side alley, go through a couple of blast doors, through a metal detector and two or three security guards. The worship space is beautiful, but under each seat there is a hard hat ... like a life vest on an airliner. Our guide to the synagogue, the woman who was in charge of the day to day operations of the place, when we asked about those hardhats said, "Oh those are a reminder always to us of what might happen. We know we might have to give up everything at almost any time. We are ready."

I have enormous respect for that kind of tough honesty. It is the kind of clarity that grew the Christian movement in its earliest days. We call it martyrdom. The earliest Christians laid down their lives rather than burn the incense of worship to Caesar's murderous state. They were willing to give up everything for the sake of the truth at the heart of their lives. That's all the word martyr means – it means "witness." The witness of putting your money where your mouth is. Not just words. Words all by themselves are as cheap as the air that produces them. No, words with actions to match is what martyrdom requires. That's what converted the ancient world. It's all that ever will.

But like so many other important words, the word martyrdom has been corrupted, twisted into a hateful caricature of itself. The bombers of the Neve Shalom Synagogue would claim the title and make it obscene. That's why the witness of the Jewish community in Istanbul is so important. That's why in the days and years ahead, we Christians will have ample opportunities to put our faith into action, perhaps at great cost. You see, faith motivated by fear and hatred is never legitimate. Grief, yes. Love, yes. Hope, yes. Integrity, yes, yes, yes. For Christians, the cross reveals the truth of God himself as being this willingness to give up

everything for the sake of love. It is radical non-violence in the face of hatred. In St. Thomas Church in New York City there is a shrine, a memorial to the victims of 9/11. It's one of those achingly human medieval crucifixes. Hanging near the pulpit, under it is a plaque with an inscription, words from a speech delivered there on the one year anniversary of 9/11 by the late Queen Elizabeth of all people. It says simply this: "Grief is the price we pay for love." Yes it is and God knows it. God does know.

The truth at the heart of the gospel is that this way of life we call Christian is going to cost us, if it's ever going to be real. It might very well cost us everything. That's the point of this gospel story this morning, this wonderful old story of the widow's mite. I don't know how you first might have heard this story, but I distinctly remember it from my third grade Sunday School class. I can still see the pastel colored hand out with the raven haired widow, raggedly dressed, tugging along her little boy, and piously clinking down her two little coins in the Temple collection box. It was a model for pious little Lutheran children to follow. We had collection boxes too, and coins, most of us. The message was unavoidable. Candy or Jesus? Which would it be?

Now, there's nothing wrong with teaching children to tithe (or adults for that matter), but if our understanding of stories like this one stay stuck at a third grade level, we're missing the real adventure of the Christian life. This widow gave everything. And it wasn't her money that impressed Jesus. She held nothing back. With nothing to hide, nothing to squirrel away in a secret corner, she was utterly transparent to God. She *trusted* in God. Like her forerunner the widow of Zarephath, she had to. There was nothing left to prop up the illusion that she could provide for herself, do it herself, save herself. And it's not that she was some kind of fool, she hadn't gambled away her money, she hadn't just given it all away. She was a victim, as widows were in that culture, of a patriarchal system that kept women in positions of such vulnerability. But she refuses to cooperate with her victimization. She does not hate, she does not strike back, she does not drown in bitterness. She gives. Like a miracle, she opens her hands and gives what she has. It is an act of unbelievable generosity, trust, and courage.

And it reminds me of so many others. In the face of the uncertainties before us in this country, I am clinging to the witness of so many others who are ready for whatever comes, ready and resilient and committed to love. It reminds me of a woman I know whose response to a diagnosis of recurrent cancer is to reach out to other cancer patients. It reminds me of a young man disowned by his family because he is gay and who has chosen to work in a crisis center for youth struggling with the same kind of rejection. It reminds me of teenagers I have met in places like South Sudan or El Salvador whose lives are lived under a crushing poverty we cannot imagine and yet who sing and dance and hope for the future. It reminds me of people I have worked with in small congregations who do not know how they're going to keep the doors of their church open and who believe they have to, not for themselves, but because there are people in their town who depend on the food pantry they run. It reminds me of a young soldier I read about who fell on a grenade so that no one else would die in the lunacy of war. The story is about a widow and her coins. And the story is about you and me.

There's a wonderful old prayer attributed to St. Francis that prays for the grace to give ourselves away freely, because, as it says, "It is in giving that we receive ... it is in dying that we are born to eternal life." Dear friends, whatever you have, two coins or none at all, a sunny heart or a heavy load, I invite you to give it to Christ. Right here, this morning. Let us follow the Lord Jesus who gave up everything for us, for the least of these our brothers and sisters, for this broken, beautiful world.