

My professor, Lois Malcolm, teaches that some people need to check their ego while others need to start taking up some space. Just before the Gospel we heard today from Mark, Jesus says that the second commandment after loving the LORD your God is to "Love your neighbor as yourself" Jacqueline Bussie reflects on this commandment and also recognizes people who need to take up space. She writes that some people, like her mom, like me, maybe like you, need to view this commandment as "you already adore other people and you are fabulous at it, now remember to love yourself as much as you do them." It is within the context of loving my neighbor and loving myself that I consider the message of scripture today.

We hear about two widows and I wonder if they're victims of the one-way love street as well. Within the patriarchal system of the time, widows had no rights, they were the poorest of the poor and were often reduced to begging. Neither woman is named, which is perhaps yet another sign of the marginalization of widows within this culture. Sometimes I'm astounded by the outrageousness of ordinary people's actions in the Bible. I consider myself a fairly ordinary person, but compared to these people, not so much. My first reaction is to feel guilty because I don't give nearly as much as

these ordinary people. I see myself residing in a comfortable bubble of security where I first recognize my privilege. But when I hear the words of Lois Malcolm and Jacqueline Bussie and Jesus, I see that this comfortable bubble is not just about money, possessions and privilege, it's about something else too. My guilt doesn't serve God, and so God is poking my bubble. God is trying to show me a way out of my bubble, a way of faith.

In 1 Kings Elijah is sent by God to Zarephath where God has commanded a widow to feed him. Both God and Elijah don't seem to accept the present societal system that widows are poor and probably don't have enough to share. I'm astounded by outrageous act #1: Elijah doesn't question this command to go away to be fed by a widow, he just travels to Zarephath. Outrageous act #2: Elijah arrives and meets a widow right at the gate of the town! It seems that he didn't have to look far. Outrageous act #3: He actually calls out to her for a drink of water, and as an aside, to bring him some bread too. I'm a bit relieved that she reasonably argues that she has so little food, not enough to share, she plans to go home and die with her son. Outrageous act #4: Elijah tells her "Do not be afraid;" go make some bread for me first then for you and your son. "Do not be afraid" he tells her. So, she doesn't back-talk Elijah, this stranger who just ordered her to fix him some food -- at the moment of her greatest despair when she

expects she will die, she does outrageous act #5: scripture says “She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail.”

Outrageous act #6: They ate for many days. This widow demonstrates incredible generosity and faith during the time of her deepest need. She gives everything she has and God shows up.

This seems like a straightforward message until we hear today’s Gospel from Mark. It begins with Jesus teaching and criticizing the Temple leaders for how they expect and receive the best treatment and respect while “They devour widows’ houses”. This is not an outrageous scene for me, although I wonder if it should be, this is a too-familiar scene. A scene I see in news reports about powerful people enjoying their place of privilege openly, seemingly unaware of the oppression this privilege imposes upon others. It’s the paradox of the powerful and the oppressed, the ego-driven and the nearly invisible. Not long after Jesus’ teaching, A poor widow enters the Temple and drops two copper coins into the treasury. Jesus exclaims that she “has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.” Here I see outrageous act #7: she put in everything she had, all she had to live on. And outrageous act #8: Jesus notices. Again this widow

demonstrates incredible generosity and faith, but Jesus doesn't praise her for this.

Along with these outrageous actions, Jesus' teaching makes me wonder if these widows are making smart choices. Even as a person who is still learning to take up her own space and love herself, I recognize that these are not smart choices. We live in a culture where it's smart to save money for college, for retirement, for an emergency, for home improvements, for vacation, the list goes on. While Jesus was criticizing the system that oppresses this widow, he does not agree with her choice to give the last of her money. Jesus condemns the value system that motivates her action, and he condemns the people who conditioned her to do it. I can almost hear Jesus telling the widow "Stop! Love yourself!" It first seems like God is calling people to give everything they have and yet human experience and even Jesus insists that giving everything isn't a very smart choice. This is not a one size fits all message, God loves each of us as we are. Where does this paradox leave us?

God is not asking us this morning to empty our cupboards and bank accounts, but God is challenging us to reconsider the way we operate. This is not an either-or operation, it draws us into operating in a way of both-and. God asks me to hold the tension between security and chance,

between checking my ego and taking up space, between loving my neighbor and loving myself. God gives us the freedom to choose and to learn how to hold this tension. At the same time God is calling us to a place of deeper faith and trust in Him for the sake of God's kingdom on earth. A place where we recognize God in ourselves and in one another. A place where the powerful see the oppressed, and respond! The good news is that God shows up in my life and is replacing my insecurities with strength. Strength to recognize oppressive powers and live into the person that God has created me to be. This is how together, we as the church, can change communities, nations and the world. God shows up. God is telling us "Do not be afraid." Have courage. Courage to take another chance, to give all that we have, and to witness the awesomeness of God showing up. . .again. "Do not be afraid." Step outside of your bubble.