

## The Unsung Heroes of Faith

Scriptures: 1 Kings 17:8-16 and Mark 12:38-44

Grace be yours and peace, from God our creator, and from Jesus Christ, our Savior. Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

[opening comments]

In April 2009, an unknown, unemployed 47-year-old woman took the stage of the television show, Britain's Got Talent. She was, even by the most generous description, frumpy, awkward, and really nervous as she walked out to the small piece of tape marking her spot at center stage, facing a large cynical audience accustomed to beautiful young talent acts, and a trio of judges chaired by the infamously harsh critic, Simon Cowell.

All her life, she had been told she had brain damage, and she struggled with living a “normal” life. Only later did she learn what she actually had was a form of Asperger’s with a very high IQ.

She was an unappealing and unpromising contestant, if ever there was one. But as the crowd’s laughter died down, Susan Boyle opened her mouth, and out poured the amazing lyrics and captivating melody, “I Dreamed a Dream,” from the show, Les Misérables. It was a powerful and confident voice that seemed not to fit the body from which it sprang. She sang like an angel set free. And as she sang

the audience was transformed from being cynics to being converts. They listened in stunned silence for a few seconds, and then burst into a standing ovation throughout the rest of her song. And in that moment, the dream that Susan Boyle dreamed...actually came true.

It was a great story. Rags to riches. Anonymous individual to a YouTube sensation overnight. From “no opportunities” to “no limits” – all in a New York minute. I love the Susan Boyle story. It makes me wonder how many other heroes and champions are living right here among us, lacking only their chance to show the world their hidden gifts and talents. What great business ideas fail to be born for lack of adequate capital? What potential leaders remain in the back of the room because they can’t get up the courage and hope to keep trying after facing early defeats? What loving hearts stay locked up in loneliness rather than risk opening up after experiencing betrayal or bereavement? What great novel or music remains unwritten because the author can’t face another round of rejection.

You know, it’s not insignificant that before being “discovered” on a brightly lit stage of a television talent show, Susan Boyle found a loving, nonjudgmental place where she felt free to sing—her one safe space where she could find her voice, and let it soar. She did that as a member of the church choir in the tiny village where she lived.

But many times, the most important moments in our human story don't happen on center stage, and they aren't captured on YouTube or Instagram or Facebook. Some of the great human stories aren't played out in front of thousands of adoring fans, nor affirmed by loud applause. Like the patient caregiver who tirelessly cares for the physical and emotional needs of a single bedridden patient or family member. Or the soldier who risks his or her life to protect our safety and freedom. Or the individuals with very little resources who nonetheless open their hearts and their wallets to share with others even less fortunate than they are, or who drop two small copper coins in as the offering plate passes by in church—a little drop in a vast sea of need. Yes, these are the silent, anonymous champions of the human spirit. Upon their faithfulness the world turns, and the Kingdom of God advances.

Both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament tell stories of unlikely generous champions, women and men who play out their lives, often in obscurity, except for the watchful eye of God. Just two examples to illustrate from our Hebrew Scripture Lesson this morning from I Kings 17 and our Gospel Lesson from Mark 12: Both were widows, both were heroes of faith and generosity who would have played their roles anonymously, unknown and forgotten by history, were it not for the recording of their stories in the pages of Scripture.

Remember that in biblical times, widows were at the very bottom of the socio-economic ladder. In a world where a woman's status was tied to her father or to her husband's status, a widow outside of a faith community was pretty much left to fend for herself. There were virtually no honorable or well-paying jobs for single women in this economic system. There were no Social Security payments, or 401K plans or IRAs or Pension plans. As a result, widows were usually poor, marginalized, and vulnerable, to be used and abused by the more powerful men in society. So, it's not an incidental detail that Scripture tells the story of two widows, women who were heroic champions of faith and upon whose generosity the biblical story proceeds. These widows offer generosity exactly where we would least expect to see it. They are the unsung heroes of the stories.

The widow in the story from I Kings 17 was even more unlikely as a champion of Israel's faith tradition, because she was a Gentile. Elijah had fled Israel during the terrible drought and was facing death threats during the reign of the evil queen Jezebel. God provided for Elijah in unusual ways while he was in self-imposed exile from his Homeland. Sometimes it was Ravens that brought Elijah food. But in this story, God provided for the prophet through the unlikely presence of a widow who was literally down to her last meal. And yet Elijah approached the stranger, and invited this Gentile, this desperately poor woman, to share what little she had left with him, and to trust that if she did share, God would

keep refilling her empty flour jar and jug of oil, day by day. And amazingly, she said “yes” to Elijah’s over-the-top request. And sure enough, each day, as she emptied her flour jar for that day’s meal, God would refill it by the next day.

Notice that God didn’t give her an entire years’ worth of flour on the first day. God wanted her, and wants us, to learn to trust God for Our Daily Bread, and our daily life. Of course, we would rather trust ourselves, our portfolios, and our own ingenuity, wouldn't we? But not this widow. She took the leap of faith, and expressed her trust by extending generosity.

No wonder Jesus told her story as an illustration in his first sermon at Nazareth (in Luke 4:25-26). She is a true hero, a model of faith and trust and generosity for us all - even if she is a most unlikely hero.

And in Mark’s gospel, as Jesus’ life was heading toward Holy Week, he and his disciples were watching people drop their donations into the temple offering plate. Jesus pointed out the remarkable faith and generosity of an unnamed widow who waited patiently in line among the wealthier donors (Mark 12:41-44). When her time came, she dropped in two small copper coins, worth very little compared to the larger gifts offered by most of the others in that line. As far as we know, she didn’t even know Jesus was watching her. But Jesus knew that those 2 coins represented her entire net worth. It was all the money she had. What would cause this poor widow to give everything she had left to an ordinary offering at the

Temple? We don't know her story. We don't even know her name. But you can be sure there is a story there. Behind every great act of generosity is a story, even if only known to the giver and to God.

Well, Jesus noticed. Jesus said to his surprised disciples that her gift was the largest one given, because the way God does accounting is not by counting the number of dollars in the offering plate, but by comparing one's gift to the dollar still in our wallets or purses. What inspired that widow to drop her first coin, much less her second? As Jesus said, "she gave everything she had in this life." It was the same thing Jesus would do later that week on the cross....

Does the world always take notice of these heroes? No. But it doesn't matter. Because God notices. God remembers. The Kingdom of God moves forward. And with God's grace, that's an amazing story of generosity and faith....  
Amen.