

November 8, 2015
Proper 27, Year B
Mark 12: 38-44
Rev. Dcn. Leeann Culbreath
St. Anne's Episcopal Church
Tifton, Georgia

Nearly 14 years ago, I was planning a big trip—the biggest one of my life. I agreed to join a few friends on a human rights delegation to Colombia (South America, not South Carolina) to help develop a sister-city relationship between our town of Helena, Montana, and a community there. A decades-long Civil War was still under way, and our group would be visiting a community and outlying villages controlled by the paramilitary—where it was common for community leaders and farmers to be assassinated. While I had traveled to Europe in the past, and Niagara Falls, I'd never been fully immersed in another culture, especially not in a war zone.

I was corresponding cross-country with a soft-spoken gentleman in Tifton, Georgia—a man I met at a wedding a few months prior, who would eventually become my husband. I expressed to him my excitement as well as my deep fears of being held hostage, or perhaps just sliding off a treacherous mountain road. He offered to me then an old adage that helped carry me through and not back out of the whole trip:

“A ship is safe in the harbor, but that's not what ships are built for.”

It's a nugget of wisdom that's come back to me many times since then: When I moved across country to marry the man who first shared it with me. When we embarked on parenthood. When I answered a call to become a deacon in the Episcopal Church. In countless smaller adventures across the years. And now I hear it again as I prepare to leave St. Anne's to expand my ministry in new ways.

“A ship is safe in the harbor, but that's not what ships are built for.”

Albert had heard the quote in a favorite song, but it traces back to 1928 and an author named John Shedd.

Even though the quote ends with a preposition (which drives me nuts!), it gives me particular comfort and confidence now as I leave the familiar harbor of St. Anne's but do not yet know the exact destination. I just know that a new ship has been built and it's time to pull up the anchor to see where God leads.

It's not a cruise ship, though—I won't be lounging around on a sun deck these coming months, just waiting to land. Rather, the initial time out on the open water will be one of active discernment—that is, I will continue to work on a few things, but with a more intense and reflective focus. I've narrowed it down to three basic categories: Earth, birth, and church.

“Earth” means helping to grow our diocese's Creation Care Commission, an environmental conservation ministry I founded earlier this year and is steadily growing.

“Birth” means working with moms, especially expectant and new moms, providing spiritual care, family wellness education, and support groups. Also included here is ongoing ministry at Ruth's Cottage, our local family violence shelter.

“Church” means helping to build up the ministry of the church, particularly its deacons. I hope to continue and expand the work I do to promote and connect the deacons of our Diocese, to strengthen and grow our presence.

I will remain an active deacon in the Episcopal Church, but will be representing the Diocese of Georgia instead of St. Anne's until I have a new parish assignment.

My family will journey with me, worshipping with our extended church family around south Georgia, and taking more time for family Sabbath together. We'll be exploring what seems to fit us for worship and community. This is a big change for them as well,

but I know at least one of them is hopeful that there will be more opportunities for fishing from this ship!

Focusing in the coming months on these three areas of ministry will help open up considerable time and space for me to sense where God is guiding. My experiences with these ministries as I give them more time and energy will help steer this ship to a landing where I can use my gifts in new, and possibly bigger, ways.

My dear friends, I am *excited*, looking out over that horizon. New opportunities to serve God, new relationships, and growth await.

Yet, as with most partings and new adventures, I feel sad and anxious too. Change and growth can be risky, full of unknowns. Jesus warned his disciples that following him would mean sacrifice and separation, discomfort and danger, without a clear destination. The poor widow in today's Gospel knew something about risk as well. We don't know what motivated her to put her two last coins into the temple treasury—deep faith? desperation?—but she took a risk and put her livelihood in the box. Actually, the Greek says she put in her *bios*, from which we get the word biology, meaning life. She offered forth her whole life, depending on God to lead and provide.

As one of the most vulnerable and powerless people in her culture, she probably was not leaving a safe harbor. If she had the equivalent of a ship to launch forward, it would probably have been no better than the treacherous dinghies that Syrian refugees desperately overcrowd, hoping for a chance of survival.

I don't think Jesus points her out to glorify her abject poverty or low social position but rather to expose the cruel and unjust scribes who hoard their gifts and inflate their egos. They had big ships and holy harbors, and they kept as much of it for themselves as they could. They missed the point that whatever we have—material goods, abilities, support—is from God, and meant to be shared fully and boldly to build God's Kingdom.

Jesus essentially condemns them.

If we are honest, I think we tend to identify more with the scribes than the widow. We hold back on using our gifts if it feels too risky, and we often fail to see gifts as just that .. gifts. Gifts given to be re-gifted!

This is certainly true for me. For instance, this new ship I mentioned earlier? It would be easy for me to think that I built it myself and that it looks way too shiny in the harbor to let it go and get roughed up. The truth is that many have contributed to the building of this ship. The main structure of it has been with me perhaps for my entire life—uniquely crafted by God—but the hull, deck, masts, and even the cabins and contents, have developed through experience, especially experience at St. Anne's over the last 12 years I've called it my church home.

You've built me up with constant love and unflagging support. You've trusted and joined me in some wild adventures, like tornado relief mission trips, chili cook-offs, and those tongue-splintering compostable wooden sporks. We've read books together, studied Scriptures, and reflected theologically. Together, we've delivered food and offered prayers in parts of Tifton most never see. You've given me confidence in my call as a deacon, and provided me with tools to live it out. I've learned not a little about authentic Southern hospitality. At this altar, again and again, you've shown me the transforming power and beauty of our Sacraments. You even allowed a banjo in the sanctuary!

Indeed, in ways too many to number, St. Anne's has helped build this new ship, and for that I am profoundly grateful. Ironically, this very parish was raised up over a century ago by shipbuilders; how beautifully that ministry has continued.

But I cannot hoard these gifts, or any other gifts I have. It's time to head out, to share all of the love, grace, and sacred presence that I carry with me from this place into the world where it is so badly needed.

It's what Jesus calls ALL of us to do, in our own ways, in various vessels throughout our lives. All we are like ships (that hopefully have *not* gone astray)! We are ALL in building, waiting, or sending phases, even as we help build up others' ships, making them strong and seaworthy. Sometimes the building process takes longer than expected, sometimes shorter. Sometimes there are storms that delay departure. Eventually, though, it becomes time to pull up the anchor and *go*, to go spread God's Kingdom of Love in a new way. It may be a dangerous journey of great geographic distance, or just across town. It may be simply a journey of the heart to a new understanding or new relationships. Whatever the journey, when it is time to go, we need to go. It's a form of obedience that is essential to the life of faith.

St. Anne's is a beautiful and special harbor. I will miss it—miss y'all—fiercely. But it's time for me to be a little less like the scribed and a little more like the poor widow who “put in everything she had,” trusting God to sustain and guide.

“A ship is safe in the harbor, but that's not what ships are built for.”

We who are baptized in Christ are built for Love. We are built to *go*, to follow, and to share the Good News and the Good Gifts of Jesus with the world.

Thankfully, we never go it alone. Those who helped make us seaworthy through their love and support travel with us in our hearts, and the Lord who walks on water and calms the storm goes with us and guides us toward new horizons.

Amen.