

Perhaps the greatest surprise for me in seminary was the Hebrew language. I loved it! Here's what I love about the Hebrew of our scriptures: one word can carry so much meaning. And in our gospel reading this morning I am reminded of one of those packed Hebrew words; I've had a crush on this word for about 5 years now; it is my sacred word in centering prayer; it is the Hebrew word, "hinneh." Now this word has two different but related meanings in the Hebrew scriptures. The first meaning is, "Behold." Here the word describes God or something God is about to do. "Hinneh" as a trumpet blast: "HINNEH!" "Behold, I am about to create something new," the prophet Isaiah sings. "HINNEH!" There is another meaning which is far more understated: "Here I am." Hinneh in this meaning appears typically in the calling stories of Israel. When God brings Abram out beneath a blanket of stars and promises that number of descendents Abram whispers, "Hinneh. Here I am." This is the word that Abraham utters when God calls him to sacrifice his only son by Sarah, Isaac. Hinneh. When Moses hears a voice beckoning him to a bush that is ablaze with the glory of God, an awestruck Moses stutters, "Hinneh. Here I am." When Isaiah has his vision of the glory of God filling God's heavenly temple until overflowing, with seraphim and cherubim and angels exalting the Lord God asks, "Whom shall I send?" And Isaiah's startling response is, "Hinneh. Here I am. Send me." This is the Hebrew equivalent of the word the child Mary declares when the archangel Gabriel tells her that she will birth the savior of humankind. "Hinneh." We can see that this is not the word spoken in triumph at the end of a tremendous show of faith; "hinneh" in this second sense is the tremulous word of faith told furtively as the self is offered up, BEFORE the person even knows what they are surrendering into.

Our gospel lesson this morning is a graphic illustration of both understandings of "hinneh." In much of Mark's gospel there are stories peppered with allusions and hidden symbolism, but not here. Our lesson this morning has all the subtlety of a velvet Elvis poster under a black-light. The backdrop is the great temple in Jerusalem. Jesus has made his triumphant entry into the city, and is firmly ensconced in the temple. Jesus has startled, stymied, and finally silenced his opponents. But Jesus continues to teach his followers. He points to the scribes – who are figures of authority and religious importance – in their elegant long robes and thirst for power, notoriety, and prestige. He is especially interested in the scribe's behavior in the temple itself. Jesus leaves us with the understanding that these scribes embody that first meaning of "hinneh": their behavior and their giving cries out, "Here I am!" to everyone – everyone but God. In the portrait Jesus paints the scribes simply use God and others to magnify themselves. Jesus describes them well when he says they consume widows to their own advantage. They are consumers; religion and faith is about feeding themselves.

We know this scribal attitude of consumer quite well, don't we? Consumerism is alive and well in our age. The theologian and "culture guru" John Stackhouse describes the consumer worldview this way: "To a man with a hammer everything looks like a nail. To the consumer everything looks like a meal." The consumer is convinced that he is entitled to have it his way or leave. Stackhouse notes that although consumerism is as old as humankind, what is new is its place in our world. Consumerism has become normative.

Now Stackhouse describes several facets of the consumer mindset. First, the self is both judge of what is good, and the beneficiary of what is good. This is what he calls the sovereign self. "I know what I need, and what I need is to feel good." Second, what is good or right becomes subject to market pressures. If a large enough group becomes dissatisfied with a "product" then the product must change. Good redefines itself to meet the needs of the collection of sovereign selves. Finally, consumerism presupposes that EVERYTHING can become a

packaged commodity. Even the moral good can be obtained by reading the right books, attending the right lectures, and ignoring the parts that do not satisfy the sovereign self.

While consumerism may appropriately belong in the automobile marketplace or in restaurant venues, the consumer mindset is extraordinarily dangerous in the religious and faith context. When consumerism walks through these doors our sovereign God can easily become subordinate to the sovereign self. Worship and ministry can readily become focused on the satisfaction and happiness of the individual. For the church consumer their membership in a congregation is contingent upon their happiness alone. Perhaps they say or think things like this: “Can you believe the Sunday School class? Why should I even pledge money if that’s all we are going to get?” or maybe this: “I used to like coming here, when the music was good. But since they got the new organist I’ve been going to St. David’s...” Now what I am attempting to describe is a very fine – but very important – distinction between seeking a spiritual home that nurtures your relationship with God vs. finding a place that simply attends to YOUR needs. And in this difference lies the very difficulty of the consumer mentality in the church: for the consumer it is all about the individual and not about relationship. Relationship is sacrificed for the sake of satisfying the sovereign self.

Over and against this stands the “hinneh,” the “here I am,” of the widow and her two coins. Jesus uses this stark contrast between this emptied out widow and the excess of the scribes to show us the nature of true worship. For his followers (and us!) he is defining the nature of true discipleship. Following the will of God necessarily means a surrendering of this sovereign self. Worship is an act of surrender. Ministry is an act of surrender. If one engages in singing in the choir, or becomes involved in an outreach ministry, or teaches Christian education, or preaches a sermon, only to gain acclaim and glory from others, then isn’t it God who is surrendered? The pitfalls of appealing to the consumer are everywhere for the church.

I know a man who shares this waking dream in conferences with church communities. In this dream he is standing on a treadmill, and hanging in front of him is a mirror. His reflection is shrouded in darkness until he starts walking on the treadmill. The faster he goes, the brighter his reflected image glows. If he slows down at all he falls back into darkness. Is this not the promise of consumerism: futility and fatigue in trying to make the sovereign self glow?

The “hinneh” – the “here I am” that I just love – offers a different promise. We pledge, we read the lessons, we pray together in this space, we feed the hungry, we wash these linens, we teach the children, we sing beautiful anthems for the sake of God, and God alone. We offer up what is uniquely ours to give simply for the glory of God.

I experienced this lesson shortly after seminary. I had been at St. Thomas in Columbus only about three days when we hosted one of the biggest funerals that church had seen in some time. A wonderful woman had died after a prolonged illness. She was dear to all the folks at St. Thomas, and was an artist and leader in Columbus. She was quite wealthy, as were many of her friends who attended this funeral. After a beautiful funeral service there was a glorious reception in the parish hall, with cooked hams, and casseroles, and side dishes, and desserts and punch. It was quite the continuation of the Eucharistic feast we had just celebrated. It was a feast befitting this woman’s importance and the prominence of our guests. [at least that was what I thought to myself.] One week later another woman, who was elderly and had been house-bound for many years, passed. Although she was among the first African-American women to attend St. Thomas back in the sixties, most of the congregation had lost track of her over the years. Her funeral was attended by only about 20 or 30 people, most of them from the church. After the service I entered the parish hall and was amazed. There were the hams. There were the side dishes. There were the

desserts. There was the feast. Well I expressed my amazement to a member of the parish, saying something along the lines that someone had not gotten the memo about how many folks might come. And he smiled and said, "Oh, we always prepare a feast of celebration, regardless of how many people come." And it was true. I will always admire St. Thomas for that. Funerals are events of abundance. And all the leftover food gets taken to the Valley Rescue Mission to feed homeless men and women. It was just part of the plan. Now the sovereign self cries out, "What a waste. What inefficient use of resources." But I believe that God smiles at such open offering of oneself.

God just wants us. All of us; every bit of us. And this is what the poor widow offers up. She offers up her life. With the clinking of two small copper coins that are the summation of all she has, she says, "Hinneh. Here I am." We never hear what happens to this woman, but I am convinced that life came out of that offering. I just know this down to the marrow of my being, because of the great "hinneh" of Jesus Christ, whose "Here I am, Lord," on the cross brought new and everlasting life for us.

In this very difficult year I have sensed the widow's presence powerfully among us here. In the care and nurturing we have given to one another, and to those beyond these walls, we have fed and been fed with the essence of ourselves. We have poured out ourselves in love for those who have been sick, or grieving, or jobless, or bankrupt, or flooded, or hurting in any way. More often than not we have walked the way of Abram and Moses and Mary, not knowing what we are surrendering into but with the faith that God is guiding the tremulous "Hinneh" on our lips. Perhaps it is helpful to keep in mind our work of two years ago, where we defined ourselves as "A vibrant, welcoming, and growing community of faith feeding the hearts, minds, and spirits of all who come." We defined ourselves as a people of a particular mountaintop, where the scarcity of a few loaves becomes transformed into an abundance that feeds a multitude. As a people who define ourselves as "Finders. Feeders. Fillers." we leave no space for the sovereign self. By our definition we are relationship. We are love. We are "hinneh."