



Sunday, November 10, 2024
Mark 12:38-44

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

The last month and in particular this past week my heart has been heavy with grief and exhaustion. This is a profoundly challenging time and we're facing so many overlapping crises right now. No one could argue that the 2024 election showed us exactly how glaring the political divide is in our country. Concerns for the safety of women, persons of color, and immigrants is growing rapidly. We watch with outrage as senseless war kills innocent people. We struggle to trust that our kids are safe from deadly violence in the classroom. Anxiety grows over climate change and extreme weather. Along with many more national and global concerns, not to mention the various personal struggles that we all try to balance, it can sometimes feel like we're suffocating under heavy blankets of fear, anger, and aching sadness.

In the lead up to our recent election I tried for the most part to refrain from reading commentaries on the internet and across social media. However, this past Monday I intentionally spent time watching a variety of news coverage and reading postings on the internet about what people were thinking and feeling about the upcoming election. I'm not sure that I was fully prepared for what I was about to ingest. And I'll just say that I was overcome with great sadness for where our nation and our world are and are headed.

Yes, I'll admit, the election has taken its toll. Yes, I'm disappointed in the outcome. Yes, I'm fearful. And yes, my sermon today will be political. But before you allow your anger to get the best of you and get up and walk out, let me also tell you that my sermon today won't be a distorted message crafted to fit a partisan agenda, but rather a sermon that reflects the very Gospel truths you expect to hear each week preached by your pastors. My sermon today will simply honor the very call you extended to me. A sermon that speaks truth. A sermon that doesn't waver.

But given the polarizing nature of the election and the countless message boards that were filled with pastors contemplating how honest and political they were going to be in the pulpit...I wasn't looking forward to preaching today. However, as the week went on, I recalled something my preaching professor in seminary taught us, "*for such a time as this*" he said, invoking the biblical words of Mordecai to Esther when she was faced with going into a place of potential danger for herself, and carry the burden of her people's safety in her hands. In other words, this is exactly the time when pastors are needed to preach the gospel.

We must preach that God is still at work. After all, my calling *is* to preach the Good News and believe me I'll get to that, I promise. But I don't think we can just jump so quickly to the cheerful stuff. Because regardless of who won or who lost the election, the core of who we are called to be as followers of Jesus Christ and the ministry of striving for justice on behalf of



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the poor and oppressed to which we are called is still the same. And this is so important I'm going to say it again... **Regardless of who won or who lost the election, the core of who we are called to be as followers of Jesus Christ and the ministry of striving for justice on behalf of the poor and oppressed to which we're called is still the same.**

Today's gospel story, also known as "The Widow's Mite" is a classic gospel story – one that's commonly used by pastors and churches during the stewardship season. Who amongst us hasn't heard the moving account of the widow who slips quietly into the Temple, drops her meager offering into the treasury, and then slips away? Who hasn't squirmed when a well-meaning pastor tied the story to an inevitable "If, then" question, "*If a poor widow can give her sacrificial offering for God's work, then how much more can we who are comfortably wealthy by comparison give?*" But something in me doesn't feel great about reducing this widow to a moral platitude or exploited for the sake of capital campaigns and annual budgets. However, *I do* still think this is a stewardship story – only it's pointing us to something much larger than how much we put in the offering plate each week. I think it raises questions about how we are called to steward our entire life.

Consider what Jesus says about the widow as she left the Temple that day, "*but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.*" And as far as I can tell from reading the Gospels, Jesus wasn't prone to exaggeration. If he says the woman gave *everything* she had, well, then she gave *everything* she had.

What do we know? We know that she was an impoverished widow in first century Palestine, living on the margins of her society. She had no safety net. No husband to advocate for her. No pension to draw from. No social status to hide behind. She was vulnerable in every way that mattered. Let's dive in a little deeper. The gospel writer Mark prefaces the story of the widow with an account of Jesus blasting the religious leaders of his day for their greed, arrogance, and outright exploitation of the poor, "*Beware of the scribes,*" Jesus tells his followers. Their reverence for God is a sham, and the religious institution they govern is corrupt and not in any way reflective of the God whom the Psalmist calls, "*a Father of orphans and protector of widows.*" And in the days leading up to the widow's last gift, Jesus offers one scathing critique after another of the economic and political exploitation that he witnesses all around him.

So why then would he turn around and praise a woman for endangering her already endangered life to support an institution he condemns? The simple answer is, *he doesn't*. Notice that there are actually no words of praise in Jesus' statement about the widow, "*but she out of*



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her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.” All he does is describe what she’s doing. And despite what centuries of stewardship sermons have reflected, Jesus never commends the widow, or applauds her self-sacrifice, or invites us to follow in her footsteps. He simply *notices* her and tells his disciples to *notice* her too.

Jesus notices the widow. He sees what everyone else is too busy, too ambitious, too spiritual, and too self-absorbed to see. And for me, this is the redemptive and gospel centered part of the story – that Jesus never takes his eyes off the small, the insignificant, the hidden. And I wonder why he sees her? Perhaps the reason he notices her is because her story mirrors his. The widow gave everything she had to serve a broken world, that it literally killed her.

And now I find myself hearing a bit differently Jesus’ earlier words about the scribes, where he says, *“They devour widows’ houses...”*. Could it be that Jesus points out this particular widow *now* as a living illustration of what he was just talking about? Could it be that he is pushing his disciples then and now to simply take note of the one who is normally invisible? And could it be that he is doing the same with *us*?

In order to do that though I think it would be helpful for us to look back in Scripture, because just 10 verses earlier Jesus gives the basis for everything he’s trying to convey to his disciples, to the people of his day, and to all of us today. One of the scribes asks Jesus which commandment is the greatest and Jesus answers him by telling him, *“love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength”* and then he adds a second, *“love your neighbor as yourself”* and goes on to say that there are none greater than these – Love God. And love your neighbor as yourself.

The simple reality is, you can’t actually love your neighbor unless you first see your neighbor. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, *“The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. The true neighbor will risk his position, his prestige, and even his life for the welfare of others.”*

Jesus, in commanding us to notice our neighbor reminds us that we’re called to recognize and stand up for those who are most vulnerable. That we should stand against laws and customs that exploit the poor. That we should enact policies and vote for politicians that advance such policies. That we should mirror God’s intention to care always and primarily for the “least of these.”

Standing with the oppressed, condemning exploitation, fighting against injustice, working for better laws – these are all matters of God’s Law, whose role is to instruct us how to take care



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of each other as God desires. And if we fast forward now 10 verses to the story of the widow then what Jesus is calling his disciples to do is to look around and see each other – those we know and those we don't know. *And I mean really see each other.* God is inviting us to see them, to care for them, and to advocate for a system that does not marginalize or leave anyone behind.

The gospel of Mark has an overall agenda – perspective and reevaluation – that things valued in the kingdom of God differ from that of our human society. I think what Jesus is trying to get us to do is to re-evaluate what we value, just as Jesus was doing as he watched the poor widow give her last two coins. And based on our choices and our actions, including how we vote, spend our time, our finances, what we prioritize, this informs how we contribute to perpetuating these systems or dismantling them.

Unlike the scribes who scream “*see me*” as they parade around in their long robes and seek out special public attention, Jesus instead chooses to *see the widow*, whereby embodying the very commands of loving God and one another he teaches. God cares, and God invites us to care too. God believes that we have something to contribute, that we can make a difference, that our words and our actions matter and can in fact help bring the kingdom of God more fully to fruition.

Today's gospel story tells a truth about us – that we've gotten really good at ignoring the widow, both because we don't want to be her, but also because to help her we would have to see her and seeing her would demand that we look closer at the crowd of people around us. And if we want to be like Jesus, then we have to see like Jesus.

Most importantly, this story tells a truth about God. That God sees right through our self-attentive ways, our tendency for self-preservation, and our constant desire to lean toward the lure of all that might build up ourselves, especially at the expense of those who need our help the most. And yet, even when we fall short, the God who raised Jesus from the dead will continue working to bring about all things to a good end. So, my friends...Love God and Love one another. Then find the widows and ask yourself...how will I care for them? Thanks be to God. Amen.