



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

---

THE REV. CRISTI CHAPMAN, CURATE  
THE TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, NOVEMBER 11, 2018  
1 KINGS 17:8-16; PSALM 146:4-9; HEBREWS 9:24-28; MARK 12:38-44

## NO STRINGS ATTACHED

**Mark 12:38-44** *[As Jesus taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”*

*He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”]*

A few days before All Saints’, several of us from the staff gathered around the font for a meeting. The first baptisms in the new font were quickly approaching, and we needed to sort out a number of details. There were questions to answer like figuring out where the children and choristers would stand so they could see *and* not get distracted by the water in the reflection pool. (To find out, ask a chorister what “toes in the holes” means,

and then ask them to show you.) Then there was the water: how and who would pour water into the font? Finally, we came to the heart of the matter: how to hold babies and toddlers as they were being baptized.

By now, almost everyone who regularly worships at the Cathedral has noticed that the new font is much larger than the old tree planter. In fact, the marble aspersion pool is

almost a foot higher than its predecessor. The additional height creates some interesting challenges, particularly when weighty or squirmy toddlers are being baptized.

As we talked through various possibilities, the Dean listened. When someone suggested a parent could hold a child during the baptism, the Dean finally spoke. Practical solutions were good. However, there were also deeper theological implications that needed to be considered.

Steve reminded us that a profound transfer happens when a family presents their child for baptism. Not only does a family hand over their child to another person for a ritual act. The family also surrenders their child to something infinitely bigger than all of us could ever imagine. In effect, when the handoff happens, the family gives away their child to God with no strings attached.

When Steve had finished, we looked around at each other, and this silence fell over the space. I'll be honest. As I thought about what he had said, I got a little emotional. I had to fight back tears as I recalled the day almost 17 years ago, we handed over our daughter for her baptism. As a mother, I know my daughter is not my own possession, and yet, there are times when that reality touches a tender place deep in my bones. It was a poignant reminder just how significant the

handoff at a baptism always is...and what a radical act it is to offer the entirety of a life to God.

This morning, we hear another story about an offering. For generations, the widow of today's gospel has been held up as the model giver. She gives away everything she has to a system that arguably has failed her and, itself, is about to fail...and, then, we are left to wonder where the good news could be in that story.

To be sure, the text raises a number of issues, including how systemic failures of every generation force vulnerable people onto the margins of life. Then, there is the question about predatory practices designed to take advantage of those same vulnerable people. While those issues are important and do need to be discussed, to focus on them here is to miss the deeper message Jesus was trying to convey through this widow.

Unlike the other characters in the story, the widow gives away all that she has because that's the only thing she can do. She makes no gift of convenience nor does she make a gift to be noticed. Instead, as the underlying Greek points, it is a gift that represents the whole of this woman's life. Like parents at a baptism, the widow hands over the very essence of her life to God.

The widow's gift is extraordinary, but that's not what gives this story its power. Instead, it is the widow's willingness to show up day after day despite the odds against her. She could have sought solace from some other source. She could have succumbed to the powerlessness that was inflicted upon her by society. But she does not. Instead, rather than being defined by that powerlessness, she is liberated by it. She responds by giving all she has to the God she knows cares deeply for her. And she does so with no strings attached...with no expectation she will receive anything in return. It is the ultimate act of faith. It is the same act of faith God shares in us. It is the same act of faith we are invited to practice ourselves.

On the two Sundays on either side of today, this Cathedral community will baptize nine people, and confirm, receive, and reaffirm 14 more people. Today is the day we catch our breath in between these major thresholds. It is also a day to celebrate and pray for these 23 people and their families and sponsors as they hand over the whole of their lives to God. This "in between time" is for something else, too. We remember that none of those 23 walk this path alone nor on their own. Everyone in this place has a part in this work.

In the baptismal and confirmation rites, the assembly is asked a question: "Will you who

witness these vows do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?" The assembly (all of us) responds in a loud voice: "We will!"

What does it mean to respond to that question? What counts as a faithful response? In her sermon a couple of weeks ago, Kelly Moody talked about trust as another way faith is manifested. How can we practice trust in this place with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ and within the broader context of our time?

I am mindful that today is the 100th anniversary of the Armistice. That peace agreement was designed to end the "war to end all wars." Yet, less than 20 years after the Armistice was signed, the world would find itself mired in another war that would dwarf WWI in almost every aspect of horror and destruction. Even now, we are still waiting for a lasting peace to take root.

This week, we mourn the loss of 12 more people at the hands of another human being, while we watch helplessly as vast swathes of California burn. As Christians, how is trust possible?

The widow shows us one way forward. She stands firm in the midst of uncertainty. She shows up day after day, even when human powers undermine and ignore her. She expects nothing from those powers because

she knows they are not of God. She refuses to give up, because she knows God never will give up. That is how she can offer the whole of her life: because she knows God will always offer the whole of God's life for her, no matter what. That's how perfect freedom is born. That's what makes her trust possible. That's what makes our trust possible, too.

Jesus notices this widow and points her out to his disciples in the final days of his life. The

widow's mite is his final public teaching before Jesus, himself, offers the whole of his life to God. Before he makes that offering, he wants us to know something critically important. It's hard to offer one's self to God when someone else is holding onto you. Who needs to let go of you?

AMEN.



SAINT MARK'S  
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

*Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!*