



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, NOVEMBER 10, 2024

1 KINGS 17:8-16; PSALM 146; HEBREWS 9:24-28; MARK 12:38-44

A SERMON FOR SUNDAY

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.”]*

Where is God when things fall apart? What does the “Good News” look like when we are frightened, weary, defeated, done? How should we live, what can we cling to, whom should we trust? Or, to put the question in the bluntest terms possible: what is our faith good for?

These are, of course, perennial human questions – we’ve been asking them forever. But there are times when we must ask them with fresh urgency and even deeper longing. Times that force us to confront *who* we are and *whose* we are.

I would suggest to you that *this* is one of those times. On the heels of last Tuesday’s election, so many people – in this room and far beyond it – are in pain. I will confess that as a woman of color, as a daughter of immigrants, as the mother of two brown-skinned children, *I* am in pain.

But regardless of our political views, *all* of us find ourselves this morning facing a perilous cultural moment – a moment when division, suspicion, and toxicity are thick in the air, threatening to tear us apart. In the coming weeks and months, it will be sorely tempting for us to lead with fear. To avoid, resent, or caricature our neighbors. To allow our

sorrow and anger to fester into bitterness. To withdraw from the risks of communal life and go it alone. To self-medicate in ways that numb and harm us. To just plain give up on the hard work of love, because we feel so powerless, so ineffectual, so small.

And so, I'll ask the question again: what is our faith good for?

In our Gospel reading this morning, we find Jesus sitting by the temple treasury, quietly watching as people come by to make their offerings.

Just to give you some context, the 1st century temple in Jerusalem was one of the largest structures in the world at that time – roughly three football fields wide and five football fields long. Set high on a hilltop, its edifice could be seen for miles. King Herod reportedly used so much silver and gold to cover the façade that it would blind anyone who gazed at it in bright sunlight.

The temple “treasury” consisted of thirteen collection chests, each one topped with a bronze, trumpet-shaped receptacle into which donations would be dropped. As you can imagine, when people threw heavy handfuls of coins into those receptacles, the shafts of those bronze trumpets would clang. The larger the donation, the louder and more impressive the sound.

The place where Jesus sits, in other words, is a place where piety and privilege readily commingle. A place where worship can easily devolve into spiritual posturing. A place where money, power, and influence literally clang and *speak*.

Onto this scene comes a poor widow. A woman who, according to the law, is *supposed* to be cared for by the religious and political institutions of her day, but who instead has likely suffered exploitation and deprivation at the very hands of those who are supposed to protect, provide, and advocate for her. She is, perhaps, one of those widows whose house has been “devoured” by corrupt scribes, who know how to talk the talk of religion, but do so only to secure honor, power, and gain for themselves.

With no husband, son, or honest scribe to speak for her, this woman is, by every measure that counts in her world – expendable. Vulnerable. Invisible.

The poor widow enters the temple courtyard, gets in line to make her offering, and when it's her turn to do so, drops two coins into the treasury. Two coins so tiny, grubby, and laughably worthless, they make no sound at all.

According to Jesus, those two coins are the sum total of what she has left to live on – there is no back-up. There is no emergency fund.

She is at the end of her road. In the Greek, the word that describes her gift is “*bios*.” *Life*. She offers up her *whole life*.

We might very well ask: what is the point? Why does she bother? The system is obviously broken, and those two measly coins of hers can't buy anything, anyway! What is her faith good for?

We might ask those things. But Jesus doesn't. Jesus is far too busy doing something else. He is busy *beholding* her. Bearing witness to her. Honoring her.

In a system where wealth calls loud and clanging attention to itself, in a context where the movers, shakers, and power brokers of the world corrupt religion to secure their own greatness, a poor, expendable widow – a human being at the very bottom of the social ladder – is the one who captures Jesus's gaze. *She* is the one who breaks his heart. *She* is the one whose faith he admires. *She* is the one whose daring, defiant gift Jesus instructs his disciples to notice.

As I reflect on this story in light of the moment *we* are living in, I can't help but see God's own face in the poor widow. Could it be that *this* is how God shows up when things fall apart? Could it be that *this* is what divine power looks like in impossible times?

Radical vulnerability, risky faith, extravagant sacrifice?

A quiet power that never resorts to coercion or violence? A selfless power that doesn't seek its own gain? A pure power that never devours widows' houses? A generous power that gives everything away for the sake of love? A resilient power that accompanies us in our sufferings?

My friends, *this* is our God. This is the Holy One we are called to follow here and now. Which means our calling as the Church is clear. Daunting, perhaps. But clear. The call *has not* changed. The call *will not* change.

The only question that remains is this one: will we live into this calling – even and especially at a time such as this?

Will we, like Jesus, call out injustice with courage and conviction – even when it costs us to do so? Will we keep our eyes trained on the most vulnerable – protecting their dignity, their humanity, their belovedness as fellow image-bearers of God?

Will we, like the widow, show up in faith, even when the system seems beyond repair, even when things feel bleak and hopeless? Will we offer freely the gifts we have, trusting God to turn our scarcity into abundance?

Most importantly, will we, in times of fear, threat, and precarity, cling to the knowledge

that we are held in the loving, unflinching gaze of God? A God who beholds us? A God who notices and takes delight in us? A God who bears witness to our laments, and longs to give us hope?

Isn't this, after all, what our faith is good for?

In his gorgeous and provocative book, *Meditations of the Heart*, theologian and Civil Rights leader, Howard Thurman reminds us that in hard times, we *must* hold onto a vision of the good, the true, and the beautiful – the very vision that God so desires to impart to us. In closing, I'd like to share Thurman's words with you, as an encouragement and a blessing for the work that lies ahead for each of us:

During these turbulent times we must remind ourselves repeatedly that life goes on. This we are apt to forget....

The mass attack of disillusion and despair, distilled out of the collapse of hope, has so invaded our thoughts that what we know to be true and valid seems unreal and ephemeral.

There seems to be little energy left for aught but futility.

This is the great deception.

By it whole peoples have gone down to oblivion without the will to affirm the great and permanent strength of the clean and the commonplace.

Let us not be deceived.

It is just as important as ever to attend to the little graces by which the dignity of our lives is maintained and sustained.

Birds still sing;

the stars continue to cast their gentle gleam over the desolation of the battlefields, and the heart is still inspired by the kind word and the gracious deed.

There is no need to fear evil.

There is every need to understand what it does, how it operates in the world, what it draws upon to sustain itself....

Over and over we must know that the real target of evil is not destruction of the body.... is to corrupt the spirit, and to give the soul the contagion of inner disintegration....

Therefore, the evil in the world around us must not be allowed to move from without to within.

This would be to be overcome by evil.

To drink in the beauty that is within reach, to clothe one's life with simple deeds of kindness,

to keep alive a sensitiveness to the movement of the spirit of God...

this is as always the ultimate answer to the great deception.

Beloved, may we drink in this beauty. May it fuel us for the work of justice. And always, may we rest on the loving gaze of our Creator.

Amen