

From the Heart; Mark 12:38-44; Pent 25B
Second Presbyterian Church
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Our second Scripture reading this morning comes from the gospel according to Mark. Jesus has been teaching in the temple in Jerusalem. The Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians have all come up to Jesus and tested him with questions to trip him up. However, as Jesus sits in the temple, he looks around and sees two things quite opposite of one another. Listen for God's Spirit as I read from Mark, chapter 12, verses 38-44.

Scripture:

38 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 market-places, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'

41 Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then 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. ⁴⁴For 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.'

Sermon:

Today we read about Jesus in the temple. In our passage Jesus is paying attention, close attention to those around him. It is what he notices that is striking, and I believe his noticing is important for us to examine because of our world today.

First Jesus sees the scribes and he calls them out, warning his disciples and those he is teaching about their actions. The scribes "like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect." (v 38). They like attention and want to feel important. Jesus continues, "[they like] to have the best seats in the synagogues... [and] at banquets." (v 39) They want and need to be seen as important both in the synagogue and in settings outside of their domain. They want recognition for their status in all places and acknowledgment of their importance. These religious

leaders who have unaccountable respect, are acting like lords rather than the servants¹ they are called to be.

Jesus doesn't hold back as he continues, "They devour widows' houses..." (v 40) This verse points to their "corrupt morals."² Since scribes did not receive money from the state, they often preyed on the weak to make their money.³ They were greedy, haughty, oblivious to other's needs, and corrupt.

Jesus is clear about how their corruption will be seen in God's eyes. "They will receive the greater condemnation." (v 40). Not only will they receive condemnation, but Jesus is strongly condemning their actions and motives. Jesus notices what is in their hearts.

These scribes and their corrupt morals set the stage for our next story.⁴

Jesus watches as people put money into the temple treasury. Contributions to the treasury were voluntary to pay the court officials like the scribes.⁵ Jesus watches as those who are rich give large sums of money to the temple authorities. Then Jesus sees a poor widow who puts in 2 copper coins. The 2 coins are estimated to be worth about 1/64th of one day's working wage. Not much to live on⁶ and it is all she had. Everything.

Mark is contrasting two very different types of people. Wealth vs. poverty. Have vs. have not. Leaders vs. those they serve. Physical prosperity vs. Physical poverty. Spiritual prosperity vs. spiritual poverty.⁷ Who is rich and who is poor here? Who puts their trust in God? Who is serving God faithfully?

Widows were some of the most vulnerable and poor people in Jewish society. Jesus notices this widow as a stark contrast to the scribes who want to be seen in the temple. She is different. She is certainly unremarkable, almost imaginary and unseen in her ordinariness. She puts two coins in the treasury when she could have kept one for herself⁸ and possibly lived another day. She is so silent; no one notices that she sacrifices her very life for the very scribes who are using her and her money. "Her sacrifice expressed her love for God and her trust

¹ Jesus' condemnation of hypocrisy, Mark 12:38-39, from Constable's Notes, Lumina Net Bible, <https://netbible.org/bible/Mark+12> accessed 11/8/24.

² Jesus' condemnation of hypocrisy, Mark 12:40, from Constable's Notes, Lumina Net Bible, <https://netbible.org/bible/Mark+12> accessed 11/8/24.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jesus' Condemnation of Reality, Mark 12:41-42, from Constable's Notes, Lumina Net Bible, <https://netbible.org/bible/Mark+12> accessed 11/8/24.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jesus' Condemnation of Reality, Mark 12:41-44, from Constable's Notes, Lumina Net Bible, <https://netbible.org/bible/Mark+12> accessed 11/8/24.

⁸ Jesus' Condemnation of Reality, Mark 12:43-44, from Constable's Notes, Lumina Net Bible, <https://netbible.org/bible/Mark+12> accessed 11/8/24.

in God to sustain her”⁹ even after she gives everything she has to live. Unlike the scribes, she has the heart of a servant.

The temple scribes struggle to be God’s servants. They don’t trust God to give them what they need because they squeeze money out of the poor, even “devour[ing] Widow’s houses” (v 40). They act as if they live in fear of not having enough. They depend on themselves and their positions to get what they want, rather than trusting God to give what they need. They lost sight of who and what matters. Instead, they serve themselves.

As Christians who live in America today, in the chaos of politics, in a society that loves violence, guns, and drugs, in a culture that has lost sight of love for those who are different from us, and in a country that has forgotten the poor, the homeless, and those who are marginalized, we’ve got to decide who we are going to be in this world we live in. Will we be like the scribes who depend on themselves for what they have? Will we be like the scribes who are fearful and work for their own good and not for the good of the downtrodden? Or will we be like the widow who trusts God’s provision above the corruption of the system? Will we be like the widow who has the heart of a servant or like the scribes who have no trust in God to provide?

This past week has illuminated the deep rift that is present in this country. No matter where you stand politically, we can all say there are others in this country in which we strongly disagree. We strongly disagree on so many things, that we’ve lost sight of the things on which we should agree.

Since the election, I’ve interacted with people who are angry, some who are distraught, others who are incredulous, and more who are completely giving up. If there is one thing we cannot do as Americans, it is to give up. We must not lose hope in the foundational assertion that our country stands for the equality of all people. That equality is what men and women have given their lives for, not for a Christian nation, not for a nation of white people, not for a nation where everyone is the same.

God has created us to be different and our call as Christians is to try and love everyone who enters our orbit. We don’t have to agree with everyone, but we are called to love everyone, even if they hate us. We cannot expect to solve the problems we face in this country, if we are not prepared to work for what matters to God, and that, I believe, is love born out of reconciliation with our brothers and sisters who believe differently than we do.

In our passage from Mark, the difference between the scribes and the widow is the intentionality of love. The scribes take what they can from widows for their own security. The widow gives because her intention of love is to serve God, not

⁹ Ibid.

to worry about herself. The scribes cheat others out of money. The widow gives her money for God's work.

Jesus does not commend the widow for her unselfish gift, but he notices her and he recognizes that she is giving everything including her life to God. Are we ready to give our lives to God? Are we ready to fight for what matters to us and to God? Are we ready to work for reconciliation and love others from the heart?

What can we learn from this passage? What is the Good News? We must learn to trust God and believe that God holds our world in loving hands. God sees the scribes for who they are as attention seekers, as those who have no qualms devouring the houses of the marginalized, and those who don't trust God. God also sees those who are marginalized, like the widow. Those who give their hearts to God despite the consequences they might face. In the bigger picture of God's story, we trust that God will make things right; until then we are called to start that process.

My hope for our world is that God is the same today, as God was yesterday, and God will be tomorrow—a God at work in our world; a God who loves us all extravagantly; a God who holds us all accountable for harming others; a God who demands our trust and our devotion; a God who died for love and lives on in the work of justice and peace.

Praise be to God—Holy parent, obedient Son, and Spirit of never-ending love. Amen.