

25th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 11.10.24

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." (163)

This was a decade ago, maybe more. A man I'd see around Lee was out for his stroll. Always when I'd see him, out for a stroll: it happened at no regular time, and he seemed to be heading to or from no particular place. This wasn't exercise. This wasn't a dog walk. This wasn't a walk to or from work, or to or from the school to drop someone off or pick someone up. Sixty years old, I'd guess he was: tall, slender, always alone, poor but not destitute, seemingly taken by an unquiet mind but not a tormenting one.

He'd seen something on the sidewalk where he was strolling near the congregational church, and it drew him to it. I was there, in the portico of the church, waiting for something or someone, I can't now remember what. He, out closer to the park, didn't see me. He leaned over and picked it up and then changed his course. He headed up the walk toward the doorway of the church, though still not noticing me. He came to the steps and laid on the top one the dime he'd apparently found.

A gift for the church?

I wish I could tell you when I saw this that I thought of the widow's mite, the widow and her two copper coins. But I can't because I didn't. She simply didn't come to mind, the widow whose giving of her last penny called forth praise from Jesus.

Or did it? Was he praising the poor widow, or was he shaming the Temple?

The Temple's treasury was topped off with brass receptacles, shaped like the horns of a trumpet. These were to catch offerings of all sizes, even the biggest sacks of coins. As such, they magnified sound, also like a trumpet's bell. When the gift was mighty, the thunk of its landing at the bottom of the treasury resounded. When the gift was but two copper coins:

<<listen>>

We're in the Temple now, according to Mark. Nearing the end of the church year, just three more weeks, we're likewise nearing the end of Jesus' life. This means in following Mark we'll spend the rest of the time in the Temple or very close to the Temple, just outside, just up the Mount of Olives with its clear view of the city and its center, its beating heart.

The Temple inspired awe in the eyes of the disciples. In fact, they sounded like country bumpkins in their marveling at it, which they would do just following this warning about the scribes, how they devour widows' houses, and this subsequent notice of the widow, proving his point. From here, having witnessed the poor widow, Jesus would come out of the Temple along with his disciples, one of whom would say to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!"

And, to give them their due, they were right to be filled with awe. That likely wasn't *just* their provincialism talking. Ancient reports claim the largest of the stones were 68 feet long, 9 feet high, and 8 feet deep. It seems Jerusalem and the Temple were feats of ambition, planning, political organizing, sound engineering, social stability, personal and corporate devotion, religious inspiration and sustaining, and raw human strength.

But Jesus was more blithe than his disciples about it all. Though hardly cosmopolitan himself, he wasn't seduced. "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

Next we see of them all, they'd climbed the Mount of Olives, this mount where an enemy army could plan an attack, a place from which to see but where not easily seen. Up there, opposite the Temple (as our gospel writer so provocatively situates him, like before opposite the treasury now *opposite* the Temple), Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?"

He doesn't, of course, tell them when this will be. If it's the case, what scholars agree as to when this gospel narrative was written, around the year 70, then it had already happened at the time of the writing of the story, and at the time of those listening to the story read. The destruction of the Temple by Rome took place in the year 68.

In fact, the gospel narratives, all four of them, should be understood as writings in the wake of the crisis that was the destruction of the Temple and of all Jerusalem. Suddenly, this lived truth passed on by oral expression seemed the sort of thing that should be written down. In case those who'd tell the stories of Jesus didn't survive this brutal break in history, in case they were

among the lost during this time out of join, the stories at least might survive, these scrolls, sent all over the place, to so many congregations of the earliest church.

But Jesus was made to answer the question before it had happened, just as the disciples lived and wondered about it before it had happened, before it was even imaginable as happening. The destruction of the Temple! This (it had to be!) indestructible building that had stood and withstood for 500 years: to come down? To come toppling down? What?! How?

When?

He didn't, of course, tell them when this would be. Jesus is never so informative as that, never straightforward; and because what he has to witness to is itself not straightforward, in the cause-and-effect sense of things. He is presence, the presence of the kingdom of God. The effect he has to whatever is most proximate to him, and most contrary to the will of God, is because of his being the presence of God.

As for the Temple? This which promised itself to be the presence of God, this which presented itself as the vector of God's power? It had become rather a vector of worldly power, where the scribes walk around in long robes, and situate themselves to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces of the Temple, the courtyards where buyers and sellers of animals for sacrifice jockey and jostle for proximity to righteousness.

But it wasn't just the scribes, I imagine. The priests, too; the Sadducees; all the in-groups who made the Temple the stage set for their powerplays, like all those who jostle for place in the halls of congress or in the West Wing or on Wall Street or at Paramount Studios, the sorts of places where you always know your place and you're always angling for the next-up rung of place, and just as often stepping on the face of the one on the next rung down: "Don't forget where you stand, though you can very much forget who you stand on."

This, because the Temple was also operating under the watching eye of the empire. Rome had little interest in tiny Judea. Really, Rome was interested in tiny Judea only to the degree that they had interest in all their tiny, backwater outposts. They kept tabs, through Herod and the Herodians. They kept up with whatever insignificant thing might be stewing there. And if it ever made it past insignificant, there would be hell to pay—an ancient expression of broken-windows policing. Throw a rock at a centurion and find your village burned. Throw lots of a rocks and maybe they'll come for your capital city, which might or might not be essential to your surviving.

Because, well, how crucial to life *are* these centers of power? How essential are they when it comes to the essentials of life? Love, kindness, sustenance, safe shelter? I'm not advocating tearing

it all down. Too many, too much, relies on the stable. But I do wonder what might grow up in the aftermath.

So, the power of the scribes, the power of the Temple elite: these were corrupt for two reasons. One was the Temple's implicit claim at being an expression of absolute, divine power. The other was its in fact being in compromise with the worldly power set just above it. The Temple elite could claim for itself the authority of the Lord, but it also answered to Caesar, which put it in a hot-point position that no one in the world should envy yet so many scrambled for.

But such is the appeal of power. Those who have it in close-to-total don't seem happy, but they do seem gleeful. So, there's that.

Please remember, it's this whole thing to which the poor widow gave her two copper coins, her last penny, all she had to live on.

Do we really think Jesus meant to praise that?

Of course, it's possible this widow wanted to do her part. It's possible she found important satisfaction in being able to support the Temple that perhaps, in ways unseen, supported her. Maybe that man in long ago Lee enjoyed having a gift suddenly to give. People need dignity as much as they need almost anything, and there is dignity in being able to give and not just receive.

It's also possible that such was the social pressure: everyone gives, everyone perhaps tithes, but for the wealthy even a tithe can go unfelt in the household finances. For the poor, ten percent cuts a lot deeper, though this widow cut deeper still: all she had. So now she had nothing, and the Temple had a penny more. What was the Temple going to do with a penny? And what might have this done with it?

Is this justice?

The election this week didn't go the way I wanted it to. I was, in fact, devastated though not surprise. I had no idea how it would go prior to it. I kept myself as prepared to be relieved as to be horrified. It had practically become a spiritual discipline. I would never set myself up to feel the way I did the first time Trump won.

And I was horrified, was and am. Half the country deems him worthy of the highest public office in the land. I don't get it. I don't understand.

Since recovering from the horror of it, I've listened to a lot of people making different and good sense of it, and I think there are many ways to explain how we got here.

Chief among these explanations should be that the news sources for so many Trump voters is a universe of lies.

Another thought, I think anyway, is this: that the indignity of Trump, which seems to me to be so evident and offensive, brings pleasure to some among his supporters precisely for this reason, people who feel they've been denied dignity themselves. Their job prospects were lost to NAFTA, which was signed under Democratic administration. Not for nothing, a decade later they suffered the financial crisis we all did, but then the government bailed out the banks, though these were the very cause of the crisis. This, while normal people got nothing, no bailout, no consolation, hardly even real recognition. This, also under a Democratic administration.

All the while, for many young people marriage prospects were lost to frustration and even being offered the military as a way out and up, as it had been such a way for young people for generations, as it was with my own father, had them fighting wars that were themselves based on lies, and that resulted in the death of many and the damaging of many, many, though while also resulting in massive profits for private contractors like Dick and Liz Cheney. Consequently, their endorsement of Kamala Harris probably didn't indicate to many voters what it was meant to indicate, that the Republican Party had lost its way, had lost its moral compass, and that to be a Republican and vote for Harris would be okay. It might rather have reminded people that it's been a long time since the Republicans had a moral compass, so let's eviscerate the Republican party, let's eviscerate the whole thing. Let's not show any of it the dignity its prancing around fancy hallways demands.

Whether or not Kamala Harris would bring to power a moral sense will ever remain unseen. But it's never entirely the case that power remains grounded. It's never entirely the case that worldly power can operate in perfectly moral ways. Herein lies the genius of the American innovation, the separation of powers. For, indeed, power structures justify themselves. Moreover, support of them can be framed as a noble act. We likely remember Jesus being such a voice, praising the noble act of this widow stripping herself of everything she needed to live in order for the power center to have evermore glory and power, if only a penny more. But he wasn't saying that. Everything around this story insists he wasn't. Hardly advocating support of the Temple, he was blithely foretelling its downfall.

Remember in *The Sound of Music*, when Gayorg said to the newest Nazi among the Austrian guests at his party that he would likely be the loudest to join in the Nazi chorus. The Nazi said, "You flatter me," and Gayorg responded, "How clumsy of me. I meant to accuse you." See, it's a matter of perspective. Is the widow to be praised or is the Temple to stand accused?

I have little faith that Trump will serve in the Oval Office for any purpose other than his

own ego needs. Those who've hitched their wagons to that star will likely get the same treatment others have in the past, arbitrary favor or punishment, capricious blessing or cruelty. I doubt there will come forth a policy agenda that corrects for the gross and dangerous inequality that has overtaken our society and that is among its most fundamental threats. I doubt there will come forth policies that present real opportunity for those who've been denied it and also denied that they've been denied it. I think the best we can hope for is another shambolic administration captive to a feckless and lazy man who doesn't manage to get much done. This, of course, will have real people suffer, but perhaps not as much as they would if he were successful at his aims.

But I hear Jesus this morning calling us to account for how we've so often misunderstood what he meant about this widow, that the poor and the disregarded are to be praised when they cooperate with the system that has kept them poor and disregarded. No! Rather the power structure that exploits while also demanding cooperation is itself a problem and should stand accused. It is itself sin and is rather to be happily anticipated for it to come tumbling down.

I don't say this lightly, please understand. I say this with images of January 6th in my mind, a day, an event that struck me then and still now as simply dark and destructive. But something was being said then, which more fruitfully has been said now. The election was decisive. How can we hear in it some word of truth?

This is the question I'm struggling with. I don't have an answer as of now. Where I have returned to again and again this week is that this will be a place a sanctuary, this will be a place of mutual care and concern. What so many of us feel we've lost in our society, some base level of social trust and mutual care, basic human kindness, is something we shall find here.

I doubt I'll preach much about Trump. He came up in my preaching the first go round with some frequency. But frankly it got boring. I think *he's* boring. Shocking and then boring. And we've got *actual* things to talk about, to wonder about, to aspire to. So, if I'm silent on the latest demonstration of earthly power gone cruel or corrupt, of which I'm sure there will be many, please don't count it as cowardice or my not paying attention but rather as the imperative that here we get to attend to what's good. In this place, we get to pay our precious attention to what makes for the good to abound.

If this appeals to you, come on in and bring your friends, whosoever they are. The weather is going to be terrible outside. Here, may there be light and dignifying beauty. Here, there shall be hope and justice and peace.

Thanks be to God.