

Mark 12: 38-44 Pastor Bill Uetricht 11/08/09 23 Pentecost

I guess I am feeling a little defensive today, a little bit like I'm under attack. There is no doubt but that if I were asked who in our gospel lesson I would identify with, it would not be the widow who is putting in all of her money in the temple offering. It would be the scribes whom Jesus seems to be slamming today. I wear long robes and often say long prayers. I often am treated with respect in the market places and frequently get the seat of honor at banquets. Jesus doesn't seem to be overly enamored with me. No, he is enamored with this poor widow who, we are old, is the victim of people like me. The religion scholars—the scribes—are said to “devour widows' houses.”

This sermon didn't come very easy this week. I spent a lot of thought time on it. I had a long email conversation with my friends Ellen and Jeremie to help me decipher some direction for this vocal event. At one point in the midst of this conversation I realized that part of my struggle had to do with the attack I was feeling. My types were on trial in the readings for today. I am a religion scholar. And I have no idea what it means to be a poor widow. I do know what it means to be in control, to call the shots, to seem to be important, to appear to be nice, neat, and knowledgeable. Yet again, Jesus' way seems to be less preoccupied with me than with her. She seems to be the focus of his way, his world.

Now I suppose I could defend myself because I really don't see myself as one who rips widows off. Oh yes, I know that the television preachers do that, and they ought to be ashamed of themselves. They, like the casinos of modern America, take money from those who least can afford it. I am not like them. And I really don't think I am like the scribes of Jesus' time. These folks were often relatively wealthy. They

got kickbacks from the temple sacrificial system. People came to offer sacrifices and paid to do so. And religious leaders often got a cut of that. That meant that sometimes they could become some of the lenders in their society. Now you are beginning to understand why Jesus said that these religion scholars were those who “devoured widows’ houses.” They probably could be involved in predatory lending processes. And what’s more, sometimes these religion scholars were put in charge of a widow’s estate after her husband died. She wouldn’t be capable of handling such a thing, it was believed. And guess what? They weren’t always on the up and up when it came to how they handled the estate. They could find ways to pocket some of the money. So I am nothing like that. I have never profited from someone’s estate or never devoured a widow’s house. I don’t even own a house.

But truthfully, I am a part of the temple system. My livelihood depends upon this system. It depends upon this little church system that we have created. And I don’t want to lose my job. And the way Jesus is going here it feels a little threatened.

And the reading from Hebrews doesn’t really help either. This book contains a lot of comparisons and contrasts between old Jewish ways and the new thing that has happened in Jesus. Today we are told that Jesus is better than the high priest who once a year offered a sacrifice of blood that, by the way, wasn’t his own. This sacrifice was offered every year. Jesus’ sacrifice of his own blood was a once-for-all-event. The sacrificial system is over, we are told. No more sacrifices need to be offered. On the one hand, that seems like very good news to me. I experience people who over and over again seem to be offering up sacrifices to deal with their pasts, the pasts they have

created or even that their parents created for them. You know, we got to do something to make up for that past. These people are very tiresome because it seems that every year—or should I say every day—they got to come back again to offer a sacrifice. The news is good. That nonsense is all over with. Once and for all! There's no need to keep coming back. Get on with life!

But frankly, that was a threat to the scribes' livelihood. They depended upon the sacrificial system. And sometimes we in the church have depended upon it, too. People have kept coming back because they had to keep earning their way, climbing the ladder back to God, making up for the past. And people like me, well, we are a part of the way they do that. We are a part of the ladder system. And if the sacrificial system is now over, what's going to happen? What are people going to do? Not show up? My job seems to be threatened.

You know as I confront Jesus and the Christian message I have to wonder if he is not taking us to a whole new system—could I put it, a whole new way of being church? With him, the center of being church, it seems to me, is the widow, this woman who is said to have given away all that she had. On the one hand, I am not sure that Jesus is commending her for giving all her money away. She seems to be a victim of the temple system, a system that we will be told in the next chapter of Mark will come tumbling down. But on the other hand, I do sense that this woman's gift of all is quite significant and telling in Mark's storytelling. In many ways, this widow and her action foreshadows what is to come. And what is to come in Mark, after the discussion of the destruction of the temple, is the crucifixion of Jesus. What she is and does anticipates what Jesus will be and do. He will be

the poor, the forgotten, the abandoned, a victim of the system. He will give up all things.

To be the church, to be the people who follow the abandoned one to the cross is to be the dynamic community of faith that centers on what I like to call the “vulnerability of God,” the God who goes the way of the cross. To become a part of the church is not to become a part of an institution that exists for the sake of its own self, for the sake of building its own empire, for the sake of having more members and higher budgets than its neighbors. To become a part of the church is to share in the life of a community that is captured by the God who becomes vulnerable, the God who honestly is a lot more like the widow than the all-important scribes. The center of our life together really is not those whose appearances make it seem that they have it all together. The center of the church’s life is the hurting, the broken, the left out, the widows who too often are the victims of the more powerful.

Perhaps because during this coming week we will be celebrating Veteran’s Day and perhaps because of what we experienced in Texas this past week, the well being of those who serve in our military has been on my mind. My wife last week heard a speech given by a member of our community who is an advocate for services for our veterans. He told the group that was present that currently between one out of four to one out of three soldiers who come back from armed engagement suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome. And the consequences of that stress for the soldiers, their families, and the culture are huge. These folks, in many ways, become the victims of the inability of the world’s systems to solve conflict peacefully. As I hear of

fourteen people being massacred in Texas I am reminded that they are at the center of why we as the church exist.

As I started this sermon I noted that I was feeling a little a little under attack. That's probably good for me. Sometimes it takes unsettling to be brought into the world of Jesus. I trust, though, that I still have a job. But honestly, I'm learning. My job is not to prop up the institution, to help people climb their way to God. My job is to be a leader in this movement, this Jesus' movement that is centered on the God who is vulnerable, the God who comes down to us, the God who looks a whole lot more like the victim rather than the victor. What a phenomenal privilege! What a great movement! I suspect that there is "plenty good room" for more to become a part of it.