

Living Large

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The Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost
The Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 11, 2018

“Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.” – Mark 12:43

In the secular calendar, today is Veterans Day. Veterans, that is, without an apostrophe before or after the s. The day is not the possession of veterans, it is a day to honor veterans, that is, all who have served in our country's armed forces. This observance is not to be confused with Memorial Day, when we remember those who died in military service, nor is it to be confused with Armed Forces Day, the third Saturday in May, which honors those currently serving in the military. Veterans Day asks us to pause, to remember, and to reflect on what it means to take up arms – that is, to prepare to kill or to be killed.

Prior to 1954, when President Eisenhower signed a bill creating Veterans Day, Nov. 11th was known as Armistice Day, the day when the armistice was signed at eleven o'clock in the morning ending the hostilities of World War I in western Europe -- “the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month” – which became the traditional time to observe two minutes of silence, as we will do in a few minutes. The first minute was to remember the approximate 20 million people who died in the the first World War; the second minute was to remember those who were left behind to deal with the aftermath of human-caused violence and destruction never before seen by human beings. Today is the centennial of the guns finally falling silent in that awful, senseless waste of life.

Flags, uniforms, weaponry, marching bands, speeches, and silence – the traditional components of Veterans Day. Nations remember their veterans with displays both of those veterans and also of the other signs of military might – an implicit statement of a country's preparedness to fight again should they consider it necessary to do so.

But who decides when war is necessary? Was the first World War necessary? What did that so-called “war to end all wars” accomplish? Barely twenty years later, many of the same countries that had been decimated by the first war were locked in a second World War, which claimed somewhere between 50 and 85 million more lives. Put those two conflicts together and you're approaching 100 million people killed by other human beings – slaughter on a scale that none of us can fathom.

And what did all of that bloodshed accomplish? Freedom, we say. The killing of millions preserved the freedom of many more millions and so we consider that success. By the standards of the world's economy, killing a few – even a few million – so that others can do as they please – that constitutes a win.

Our gospel lesson from Mark is also about an economy, but it's about a very different economy. It's about God's economy, in which Jesus says that two small copper coins, worth about a penny, are worth more than the large sums that rich people put into the temple treasury. That's certainly not the way we do math – it's not how we calculate “more.”

How do you think those people became rich? In that agrarian society, many of them doubtless

owned large tracts of land, which other people worked for them, barely making a living. Others, certainly, were merchants – small business owners, we'd call them today – who'd observed carefully, invested wisely, and labored diligently to secure a standard of living that was more than comfortable. And still others – and these were the ones who were despised by their fellow Jews – were the collaborators with their Roman occupiers, and had grown rich supporting the military-industrial complex of their day.

Which of these folks were depositing large sums in the temple treasury is impossible to say today, but they were rich – living large, as we say in secular language – and they were doing their bit to maintain the temple, the focal point of their ancestral religion.

And it was quite a bit that they were doing. The Jerusalem temple of Jesus' day was considered magnificent by Jesus's contemporaries. In the very next verse after today's reading from Mark one of Jesus' disciples said to him as they were leaving the temple, "Look, Teacher! What large stones and what large buildings!" Jerusalem was living large in those days – Herod's temple was considered the masterpiece of his many building projects – and by outward appearances, the city was doing reasonably well. Its merchants and bankers were part of a globalized economy. Goods and services were flowing through its neighborhoods for those who could afford them. And the monumental architecture that was Herod's expansion of the Second Temple was considered one of the biggest construction projects of the first century before Jesus. At least some of the people of Jerusalem were living large.

But not all. What of the widow – how had she become poor? If you look at the verses immediately before today's reading in Mark's gospel, you'll read of Jesus warning his disciples to beware of the scribes because, among other things, "they devour widows' houses." What does Jesus mean?

Does he mean that the scribes were inducing women with limited resources to impoverish themselves by supporting the temple? Or does he mean that the scribes, who were among Jerusalem's middle class, were preying on vulnerable widows for their own personal enrichment? Or does he mean that those scribes who were already wealthy landowners were forcing widows to become tenants by pressuring them to sell their property?

We don't know, and Jesus doesn't say. Some biblical interpreters say that the fact that Jesus' warning immediately precedes today's reading is Mark's way of illustrating Jesus' point. Mark is showing us a poor widow being eaten up by callous or avaricious scribes.

That may be, but it's hard for me to imagine that the Jesus who overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple wouldn't intervene to stop this widow from giving her last penny to the temple if he thought that she was being exploited.

Or perhaps what we have in this passage in Mark's gospel is an example not of either-or but rather of both-and: it may very well be the case that the widow's mite was an example of both systemic exploitation and personal devotion. Those two realities are not mutually exclusive, and when it comes to the poor expressing their devotion in material ways, those of us who are better off should tread carefully when forming judgments.

My old teacher Peter Gomes used to tell the story of a humiliating learning experience he endured as a newly minted minister. He'd graduated from Harvard Divinity School and gone down to teach history at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. He was invited to preach for a few weeks at a small country church not far away from the Institute, and so he borrowed a classmate's car and drove himself out to what was obviously a poor congregation.

His first sermon seemed to go all right, and after shaking hands with the departing

congregation, he was handed an envelope of money by one of the deacons – a love offering to thank him for preaching. Peter wasn't wealthy by any means in those days, but he knew he was better off than the folks for whom he'd just preached, and so he politely thanked the deacon and declined the money, knowing that they needed that money more than he did.

The next week, as he arrived at the church to preach his second sermon, the deacon drew him aside for a private word and gently told him how hurt the members of the congregation had been by Peter's refusal to accept their gift. Peter had unwittingly added to the pain of their poverty by refusing what little they could give him, and Peter apologized and never again refused an expression of appreciation.

When Jesus sat down opposite the temple treasury, Mark tells us, to watch – not only the rich but also hoi poloi – the crowd – putting money into the treasury – we don't know what he was watching for. But when he saw a poor widow put in what was left of her Social Security check, the pittance that she had to live on for the rest of that month, Jesus turned it into a teachable moment. Calling his disciples to him, Mark tells us, Jesus told them that the widow had put in more than everyone else because she was risking her safety net while they hadn't touched theirs because they had surplus from which to contribute. She had only herself to give and that's what she gave.

By definition, a poor widow in the Bible had lost everything a woman in her day could lose – property and male relations who could support her – and yet she gave to the temple, which was for the Jewish people the physical representation of God's presence on earth – what little she had left. Like the Sidonian widow who fed Elijah in our first lesson, this woman risked what little she had, and because of her commitment to doing the right thing, Jesus said, she'd contributed more than those who were better off. In God's economy – which was the only balance sheet Jesus ever cared about – the widow, and not the rich and not the crowd, was living large.

Jesus was not giving his disciples a stewardship sermon and I'm not delivering one to you this morning. Jesus was talking about something deeper than how we manage our own finances or the church's finances. He was talking about the relationship we have with God and the relationship we have with stuff, and in which of those relationships we place our real trust.

From a human perspective, money is never just about money and God is never just about God. They're both about trust – trusting in that which we believe will make and keep us secure. Genuine believers – like those two widows from Scripture this morning – trust in God; the rest of us trust in stuff. And the rest of us are deceived. Our stuff will not save us. It cannot save us. We cannot even save ourselves. That's the theme that runs throughout both testaments of the Bible.

“Do not put your trust in princes” we read in Psalm 146 at the start of the service, “in mortals who cannot save,” and most of us are more than familiar with Jesus' parable of the rich man who pulled down one set of warehouses to build bigger ones for his accumulating stuff. And that night he died. What good did all of his stuff do him then?

You and I have been taught since infancy to believe in the narrative of scarcity – that there's not enough to go around. The Bible teaches a different narrative, that there is plenty to go around if we distribute it properly, which we steadfastly refuse to do. And because we refuse to treat our stuff as God treats stuff – which is to say, abundantly, generously, and graciously – we live in fear – the fear of not having enough or the fear that what we do have will be taken from us.

According to Forbes magazine, there are about 2,200 billionaires in the world today, with a total net worth of about \$9.1 trillion. What keeps the world imprisoned in misery is not that so few control so much of the world's wealth while so many struggle to get by. That's plenty bad enough, but what's

much worse is the fear that keeps so many of us from trusting in God's narrative of abundance. Because trusting in that narrative rather than in the narrative of scarcity would mean that we can overcome the barrier of fear that separates us from the kind of single-hearted devotion to God that actually changes the world for the better.

That's the "more" that Jesus said the widow gave to the temple treasury. That's the more with which she lived. She lived free of the fear that God would not help her find a way to survive in this world. That's the more of the abundant life that Jesus promised to give to us if we'll trust his way more than our own way.

"Trust and obey," we used in the Baptist church, "for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey." We liberal Christians need to get off the dime of easy compromise with the world's economy and start trusting and obeying the rules of God's economy. We need to say, with our words and with our deeds, that sharing is not optional; it's our only hope for long-term survival. We need to say, clearly and firmly, that the only healthy economy is the one that provides adequately for everyone and not a lot for a few and not much for the rest. We need to say, clearly and firmly, that we're not going to be led by people whose moral compasses are so defective that they can't do anything that doesn't benefit them. We liberal Christians need to be less cozy with the world's way of doing things. We need to recover more of our own clarity about the political ramifications of the gospel.

Friends, in the long run, the parable of the good Samaritan will turn out to be far more important to the world than the Standard and Poor's Index. Monitoring the ups and downs of the stock market, in the long run, will matter far less to the world than embodying the compassion for the vulnerable and the outsider that Jesus taught in his famous parable. We think that our stock market will last forever and that there will be no end to our domination of the world's economy. But that end is already in sight, which is why we're in such a politically reactionary period right now. It's why we're so afraid right now. It's why so many of us are angry right now.

And all of this will pass – our brand of capitalism, China's version of communism, Russia's version of socialism. It'll all pass away, and with it will pass also the lives of those who lived devoted to those ways of being in the world.

But the word of God abides forever, and those who will trust in that word and allow that word to shape them into the beautiful and holy creations God intends for us to be – they are already standing in the vestibule of eternal life. For them, the shadow of a collapsing stock market or even death itself holds no fear because they know that the God who brought them into this world and has kept them in this world will keep them in any world to come.

"Our little systems," Tennyson wrote, "have their day.

They have their day, then cease to be.

They are but broken lights of Thee,

And Thou, O Lord, art more than they."

Trust more in God, friends, and less in your property or portfolio. Trust and obey, like those widows, and live large.