

Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Memorial Lutheran Church
November 11, 2018

Text: Mark 12:38-44
Theme: Everything She Had

This is a text that gets my attention! I have been known on occasion to wear a long robe and to offer a long prayer or two. I've been invited to start the line at the congregational buffet and to sit in a place of honor. This lesson invites me and all those entrusted with leadership to ask themselves, "What is the spirit in which I am serving?" Those in positions of leadership in society and religious organizations have the responsibility to be about that which God is about namely, in the words of the Psalm appointed for the day, "...to give justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger... to set the captive free... to open the eyes of the blind... to lift up those who are bowed down... to love the righteous...care for the stranger...sustain the orphan and widow... and to frustrate the way of the wicked" (Psalm 146).

As one who is entrusted with leadership in the church, I understand that God has called me to teach the Word of God centered in Christ as that which makes all the difference in the world for me and for all who by the Holy Spirit are persuaded by that Word. In doing that, I am freed to love God and to embody Christ's presence in the world. Is that what I am about? Or am I one who is serving merely to meet my own ego needs, willing to exploit the widow and the vulnerable. Would my Lord Jesus say of me, "Beware of that one!"

If that is a question that I need to ask myself, I suspect that is a question that all who are in leadership need to ask of themselves. You and I know too many stories in society and in the world of religion in which leadership has betrayed its calling. The temptation to misuse one's authority is not limited to those days when Jesus walked this earth. Nor is it limited only to those in leadership positions. Isn't the question also important for congregations to ask of themselves? As we gather in worship this is a place where we are fed and nourished, challenged and comforted. But does it stop there? Is this congregation chiefly an organization that exists to serve itself and those who are a part of it? Or is it also a place where we are fed and nourished in order that we might embody the presence of Christ in the places where we are sent everyday-in our homes, our neighborhoods and our world? If we exist only for ourselves, for our own comfort and satisfaction, would Jesus say of us as he said to the Scribes, "Beware! Beware of those who have forgotten their calling. They will receive the greater condemnation"?

I don't think that Mark's placement of the following story is coincidental. After identifying the hypocrisy of some of the religious leadership, Jesus sits down and watches what people are putting into the offering plate, offerings that will be used to support the temple and its leadership. Mark notes, "Many rich people put in large sums." Good for them! The temple and its staff need such support. But Jesus' attention is drawn to a poor widow, one for whom the religious community was called to support. She puts in several copper coins, a penny, worth one sixty-fourth of a daily laborer's wage. Jesus observes, "...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."

Once again Jesus turns our way of thinking upside down. We would be inclined to remark on the generosity of those who gave substantially and to ignore the widow and her gift. After all, what difference does a penny make? But Jesus saw something else in this gift. Jesus saw a heart that both recognized the need of the temple, but far more significantly, one whose gift reflected the deepest trust in the God who would provide for the widow. What a contrast to those of us who are inclined to be full of ourselves, cherishing more our own well-being and the recognition of others than the God who made heaven and earth.

Did Jesus see something of himself in this poor widow? His observations of the hypocrisy of some of those in religious and political leadership have a way of contributing to a plot to get rid of him, not unlike the Saudi reporter who was murdered in the embassy. In only a few days he will be regarded as nothing, whose life is considered an irritant from which society and religion must be freed. Mark began his Gospel by identifying Jesus as "...the Son of God." Here there is no focus on self-aggrandizement, no willingness to exploit the weak. Rather here is one who speaks the truth to power, who feeds the hungry, forgives sins, is attentive to the widow, who teaches about how things work in the kingdom of God. In short, "putting no trust in rulers (Psalm 146) he puts in "everything he has..." looking only to the God who has called him to such service. His death as a common criminal will seem to be "as nothing." Yet this is the one whom God will raise and with him the widow and all who look to him.

I wish that I could more easily dismiss Jesus words spoken to that particular Scribe. But I know a God whose knows my heart and its double-natured character. I too often have an eye for myself and am willing to give out of my abundance as opposed to following him who calls me to "put in everything I have." Yet after 41 years I keep doing this thing called pastoral ministry because I can bear witness to the God who puts in everything in Christ that I might know daily the power of his forgiveness, who feeds me with the gift of himself, and who calls me to serve a community and point that community to the God who in Christ Jesus has put in "everything he had" for this community too.

I believe that it was former bishop Steve Bouman who told the story of a group of homeless men who began to regularly attend and sit in the front row of one of our Lutheran congregations in New York City. When they began to attend, the ushers developed the practice of not passing the offering plate by them probably thinking that they would have nothing to give and not wanting to embarrass them. After passing them by for several weeks, one of the homeless men said to an usher. "Please don't pass us by. We want to give too." To know ourselves to be the recipients of a God who in Christ Jesus gives us everything we need, is to be freed individually and as a congregation to be the body of Christ for one another. It is to be freed to share this good news and "...to give justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger, to set the captive free, to care for the stranger, and to sustain the orphan, and the widow." By the power of the Holy Spirit, it is to be freed to "put in everything we have and are."