

25 Pentecost, Proper 27, Yr. B
November 11, 2018
1 Kings 17:8-16; Mark 12:38-44

I'm guessing that when you heard this morning's Gospel, you thought you were going to hear a sermon about stewardship. And it is, of course, stewardship time and this gospel has indeed been enlisted as an incentive to give generously, as generously as the widows in both the Kings reading and in Mark. But these readings, especially the one from Mark, are not primarily about stewardship.

The segment we have begins with Jesus talking about certain scribes. And here I'd like to insert a textual note. You may be aware that neither of the Biblical texts, not the Hebrew and not the Greek, started off with punctuation. And with regard to the text before us, scholars have pointed out that the comma right after BEWARE OF THE SCRIBES, WHO...shouldn't be there. If read with the comma, what Jesus has to say implicates ALL the scribes in what he's about to condemn. But we know that that can't be the case, because just a bit before this he has commended a scribe for his faith, telling him that he is near to the kingdom of heaven. Instead, Jesus is telling his disciples to beware of those scribes (and only those) who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted in the marketplaces, to get the best seats – beware of those who want to be noticed, beware of those for whom appearance matters more than substance. One wouldn't think much would be riding on a single comma, but a whole-scale condemnation of Jewish leaders often played into the hands of anti-Semites. So careful reading is required.

Jesus continues by saying that those attention-seeking scribes, in addition to being all about appearances, are also corrupt, because THEY DEVOUR WIDOWS' HOUSES. So there's the direct link to what happens next.

Jesus goes and sits down opposite the treasury and watches the crowd putting money into the treasury. Better people watching than Joy told us about at the Milwaukee mall in last week's wonderful sermon! Given the lay-out of the treasury, they were probably sitting where they could see one

of the outer-most courts, because of the presence of women. Historians tell us that there were 13 trumpet-shaped collection containers in which people could deposit their money offerings. Apparently, these containers were deeply resonant, so it was clear when someone was depositing a LOT because it made a lot of noise; probably the two small coins the widow put in didn't make enough noise to be heard.

A reminder here about widows. To be a widow during this time period was to be vulnerable in the deepest sense of the word. To die before reaching old age, which her husband had done, was considered punishment for sin and a curse and the wife who survived her husband shared in his disgrace. If that wasn't bad enough, Hebrew law allowed inheritance to bypass the widow. In a patriarchal society, a woman's status and identity and indeed her very survival, depended upon her male connections. The Hebrew word for widow shares roots with the word for "mute" and the widow was not only silent in terms of power, she was well-nigh invisible. In fact, the Mark reading, it seems like the disciples literally didn't see her – Jesus had to point her out to them. But even after he did, they still didn't get it. The passage started with the scribes and their desire to be SEEN and treated with respect – and the passage just after this one has the disciples marveling at the size and beauty of the temple, saying nothing about the widow but instead saying, 'WOW! LOOK TEACHER, WHAT LARGE STONES AND WHAT LARGE BUILDINGS!' Granted, the temple must have been an incredible and glorious sight, but here Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple, telling his disciples that not one stone will be left upon another. So it's as if Jesus is telling them that they are looking in the wrong direction, admiring the wrong things – don't be fooled, he's saying, by the outer trappings. Look instead at what's going on in the heart and at the margins – in this case, those people that nobody even notices. As for the Temple, the Jews felt that the temple was the place where God could dwell on the earth. No, Jesus is saying – that temple, the one made by human hands, will be destroyed and I am the new Temple. I'm the place, the person, where God can be encountered on here on earth.

This text confronts us with a number of challenges. One is to recognize the temptation to choose appearance over substance. Or to focus on all the

wrong things. Another challenge is to ask who or what we see, who or what we pay attention to and who we don't see at all.

Thinking about the scribes who were devouring widows' houses, appearing saintly, but actually wolves in lamb's clothing, I couldn't help but think of a divorce client I once had. It was an elderly man, (or at least he seemed elderly to me then) probably in his 70's. He had come in to talk about getting a divorce because his wife had become addicted to TV evangelists, with their designer suits, great hair and glorious promises. She had been fooled by appearances and was sending in all the money the couple had accumulated during their long marriage. "I have to get a divorce," he said sadly, "in order to save something or she'll give everything away." I think that's directly applicable to today's reading. The question for us is whether we think Jesus' comment about the widow giving everything away was praise or a lament. Because this is tied to his comments about the destruction of the temple, I'm suggesting he thought her giving away her very life was a lament, and that he thought the religious authorities, rather than accepting everything she had to live on, should have been caring for her and working to change the system that was killing her.

Appearances rather than substance. I remember once asking someone about Kim Kardashian – about what she was about, what she was known for, and whether she was selling something. She's selling herself as a celebrity was the response. Apparently, appearances can be very lucrative. Or at least the right appearances – because that's the next question. What do we look at and why? And what do we avoid looking at and why? The disciples were taken in by the glory of the Temple and all that it represented in that society. I'm not sure we're that much different. Aren't we captivated by displays of wealth and power? I recently read *Strangers in Their Own Land*, a sociologist's assessment of some of the people in Louisiana who were losing everything they had always loved because of industrial pollution. They characterized their lives as standing in a long line, waiting for the American Dream, which was always just beyond them because they said, THOSE OTHER PEOPLE KEEP CUTTING IN LINE – people who were different in race or country or origin. But what was also interesting was that they had their eyes on the people at

the head of the line – those they wanted to emulate. Their eyes were fixed forward and never towards those behind them in the line. Never towards those like today's widow.

And then there's what we see but turn away from. I can give you a personal example. Last Sunday's Times Magazine had a picture of a 7-year old Yemeni girl who was starving to death in that war-torn, suffering country. One glance was enough and I had to turn it over because it broke your heart and there was no place to go with your sorrow. Because, in the world of geopolitics, Yemen's enemy was well-placed, a buyer of American arms and a provider of American oil. In that contest, this little girl was invisible – collateral damage in a larger struggle. She was invisible and dispensable. Jesus lamented the system that resulted in suffering widows; can we lament in systems that result in starving children?

There's one final challenge, I think. One that is right in front of us today. And that is, if we do look and we do see, how do we understand what we see? Those people heading toward the border – are they beloved children of God, or enemies to be resisted with all our considerable might? The poor among us – are they unfortunate brothers and sisters or lazy hangers-on?

I'd like to leave you with a story that I read this past week. As you probably know anyone who presents themselves at the border and asks for asylum must, by both international and national law, be admitted into the country and into the asylum process. There are images of two responses: one a group of armed men patrolling the boarder alongside the legitimate border patrol, to keep these people out; the other is of a woman attorney who has gone to the border and who walks across to meet refugees too frightened or confused to come to the checkpoint and ask for asylum – she crosses the border, meets them and walks them across. Which do you think Jesus would praise and which would he lament?

We live in challenging times, times that hold our theological and religious feet to the fire; times that demand that we take our faith seriously and then live accordingly. Amen.

