

NOVEMBER 8, 2015 ~ PROPER 27(B) - MARK 12:38-44

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight 'O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.'

Good Morning!

It's great to be here today. Before I begin my homily I want to thank Kate and the search committee and all of you actually, for calling me to Atchison and giving me this opportunity to serve as your Priest-in-charge here at Trinity.

For those of you who don't know me, I'm Father Jon Hullinger. I was ordained sixteen and a half years ago in the Roman Catholic Church. Two and a half years ago, Bishop Wolfe received me into the Episcopal Church; and a year later, he accepted me as priest. This is my fifth assignment as a parish priest. For the past fifteen months, I have been serving as the assistant rector at St James in Wichita. You are definitely an answer to my prayers; and I hope, by the grace of God, I can be a worthy, if not a completely satisfying, answer to yours.

And speaking of rather inadequate and unsatisfying examples of religious leadership and piety, how about those scribes in today's Gospel?

This passage has always made me feel a little uncomfortable. In part, because I read it like a scribe, while wearing these nice, beautiful vestments over my long robe.

And, it doesn't help that after reading this lesson and finishing explaining to all of you what it means and how we should apply this lesson to our lives, I get to parade over to my plush chair, right up front, and sit in one of the best seats in the church while you get to sit in your comfortable pews, before I begin say the long prayers...

...It is hard not to recognize the false piety and hypocrisy in myself with all of this going on.

This year, however, as I studied today's gospel passage, something was brought to my attention that I never noticed before. So, now, it's the second half of this passage that bothers me.

In the past, I always viewed the widow's mite portion of this passage in light of its Stewardship Appeal potential. I used it as an opportunity to speak about sacrificial giving.

I would hold up the widow as an example for us to follow. I liked to point out that the church fathers used this passage to illustrate that for the Lord, the value of a gift is not determined by how much is given but by how much is held back.

If we look at stewardship that way, in terms of how much we are keeping for ourselves and of how little we are giving to God, we can, all of us, or at least I can, leave wondering if I'm really doing as much as I could or should for the church.

Now that's not a bad lesson, but I think something more is going on here.

The church didn't really give us this passage so that we would preach on stewardship at least once every three years.

This lesson comes toward the end of our liturgical year. We are just two weeks away from the Last Sunday after Pentecost and our celebration of Jesus as Christ the King. Then, it's Advent and the start of a whole new church year.

This passage is the conclusion of Jesus' public ministry. He has already entered Jerusalem for the last time. The hosannas have died down, but from here he will teach a little about the End; and then, it's on to our Lord's arrest, passion and resurrection.

Context is important.

Ever since his 'Triumphant Entry,' Jesus has been in confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees; and he hasn't shied away from criticizing the Temple authorities and religious leaders.

This passage began, remember, with Jesus condemning the pride and arrogance of scribes and accusing them of "devouring widows' houses;" of taking from them, sometimes even everything they own, to satisfy their own greed.

But notice, there are no actual words of praise for the widow; there is no indication that Jesus is even lifting her up as an example. All he does is draw attention to what she is doing and what is going on around her.

Jesus simply says, "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."

We don't know for sure what Jesus wants us to make of this. He could just as easily be lamenting as it could be praising.

If, as we heard in the first part of this passage, Jesus is opposed to the devouring of widows' houses, how could he possibly be pleased with what he sees going on here?

Wouldn't you like to hear his tone of voice?

What if Jesus is actually denouncing those who are demanding, or at any rate making her feel like she should make an offering or a sacrifice that will, in all likelihood, lead to total destitution and possibly even death?

What if he is attacking the scribes and leaders and the system and any religion that would allow, let alone encourage, a widow to give 'all she had to live on' to please God or to earn God's love?

What kind of God would that be?

On the other hand what if the story of the widow's mite isn't about stewardship or sacrificial giving or pleasing and impressing God at all?

What if Jesus is pulling the disciples aside and asking them to notice the widow because he wants them to see that God is not as they have always imagined God to be?

If that's the case, then every thing is different and that difference is the Good News revealed in and through Christ...

...The Good News that the God we worship, the God we confess, Our God, is a God who cares about the widow and her sacrifice, a God who sees her plight and recognizes her affliction, a God that doesn't demand but rather decries the abuse of the widow and who condemns all who pretend or believe that such sacrifices are demanded or necessary or desired.

Jesus wants the disciples to see that he sees the widow and cares about her and to understand that God sees her and that God cares about her and to know and believe that God sees them and cares about them. That's the Good News...

...The bad news is that no one else, not the scribes or other religions leaders or the rich and elite in the temple area, not even the disciples would have probably noticed her that day, if Jesus hadn't pointed her out and drawn attention to her. And not as an example to follow, but as someone we should also notice and care for and help and love.

He wants them to see that God loves her and values her gift so that in a few hours, when they see him hanging on the cross and dying, they will realize, inspired of what they see, that God loves Jesus and his gift and that through him God has revealed to us what it really means to love God first and our neighbor as ourselves.

Then again, maybe this passage is about stewardship after all; the kind of stewardship that grows out of God's love for us and inspires us to love as he loves us.

Let us pray that our worship here today, as we begin our journey together, may inspire us all to always give and sacrifice as much we can to help build up God's kingdom here on earth and to truly be the people and parish Christ is calling us to be.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.