

sermon 21.11.14

Psalm 127 (Inclusive Bible)

If YHWH doesn't build the house,
the builders work in vain;
if YHWH doesn't guard the city,
the sentries watch in vain.

In vain you get up early and stay up late,
sweating to make a living,
because God loves us and provides for us
even while we sleep.

Children are the heritage God gives us;
our descendants are our rewards.

Having children when you are young
is like equipping an archer
with wonderful new arrows.
Happy are those who have filled their quiver
with such arrows!
When they argue with their enemies at the city gate,
no one will be able to make them feel ashamed

Mark 12: 38-44

As Jesus taught, he said, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, '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.'

SERMON:

2 questions I was taught to ask when looking at scripture are:

What's the human condition, the places of brokenness, disconnection, sin the passage addresses?

and What's the good news to be found here?

For the gospel is known as the good news. Euangelion.

The first sentence of Mark's gospel begins:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

So how might this scripture point toward the places that need fixing in our lives, and what's the good news here, in this 12th chapter of Mark's gospel?

Not much good news for the scribes, the Sadducees, those who seek places of honor and recognition.

In the time of Jesus, the religious system of the day dictated that when a man died, leaving a widow, she lost not only her husband, but control of all finances and property. Control was given to the Sadducees, named in our passage as the scribes. Corruption was common, with women left with few resources, and if they had no family to take them in, their lives became precarious. Scribes, the religious elite, were known for devouring the homes of widows, leaving them with only pennies.

Scribes, who have the best seats in the synagogue, and the places of honor at banquets, those with visible power - are called out by Jesus.

The scandal of the time is named - what kind of a system is this that creates a place where single women are left with empty pockets and few resources?

What kind of a system is this that creates a place where single women are left with empty pockets and few resources?

Sounds so relevant to today, doesn't it?

And while it might be easy for us to point to politicians and those in power as the elite of our day - this is a call to us as well.

How do we, knowingly or unknowingly, allow systems that are unjust to continue?

And what might we do to bring about the vision of God's community where all are beloved?

Hold onto these questions with me.

Our scripture goes on, painting a picture of Jesus sitting next to the treasury, watching people come and go, contributing - some more than others, most out of their abundance.

And then Jesus calls his disciples over - did you see that, he asks. Did you notice what just happened?

I wonder, Would the disciples have noticed this widow if Jesus hadn't said - look, see, watch - don't pay attention to the long winded prayers of the elite, but to the small gestures of the nameless ones.

Jesus calls attention to the actions of the widow - the one on the margins that most don't even see.

The good news in our passage...

The good news here is that **God is paying attention to this segment of society that those with means tend to overlook.**

God sees. Not only the action, but the intention - of the scribes and of the voiceless, nameless ones.

Jesu, somehow knows this woman's financial situation; knows about this widow who gives two *lepta*, the smallest monetary denomination in first century Palestine. Jesus remarks that she has put in her whole life.

This quiet, unremarkable act is one of great courage and faith. This woman put in *her whole life*.

Our translation softens the Greek expression *here from* "her whole life" to "all she had to live on." While the phrase can mean either one, theologian Amanda Brobst-Renaud suggests the translation "*she put in her whole life*" connects this phrase with Jesus' words from earlier in this chapter - "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength".

Jesus identifies the widow as having given more: she gives herself.¹

In that unassuming gesture of dropping two small coins into the treasury, this woman gave her whole life.

What a call to discipleship! While our faith may ask everything of us, we can live it out in the ordinary tasks of our days. We, too, can give our whole being to the way of God - not making a big show of it, like the scribes, but through small actions of love and dedication.

1

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-32-2/commentary-on-mark-1238-44-6>

We can do it, and I know that we - we are doing it, in unassuming acts of presence and showing up - as individuals.

We also have the opportunity to give of ourselves as a community of faith. UMC does that in the myriad of ways we support the work in our community that supports those in need - Parkforest preschool, out of the cold, the food bank, and others.

And now, we are being given a new way to imagine together how we might practice living out of God's abundance.

Last week, along with several others in our congregation, I participated in our conference gathering - for those who aren't as familiar with the our connections to the larger church, we, University Mennonite, are part of Allegheny Mennonite Conference, made up of about 14 congregations spread from Pittsburgh to Delaware to Virginia. Our conference is one of 16 conferences that make up Mennonite Church USA. And Mennonite Church USA is but one part of the larger, global Mennonite community - which literally spans across the globe.

We are a local conference within the church here in the US and across the world.

The main discussion point last Saturday, at that zoom conference gathering, was around how to share the monetary blessings that resulted in the sale of the International Guest House, in DC - a long time place of hospitality for travelers from around the world. Nearly 2 years ago the decision was made to sell that property, and the conference has been discerning how to faithfully use those proceeds.

Our conference is inviting us, inviting us as one of the 14 congregations, to "lean in with abundant trust"... I love that phrase - we're asked to lean in with abundant trust - as we each receive a portion of the proceeds - somewhere in the range of \$35,000, to use in the spirit of the former guest house...

In the spirit of..."hospitality and welcome...in the spirit of peace and justice and the practice of honoring and celebrating cultural differences and diversity.

The conference leadership team writes " We believe this approach **honors** the guest house and is also a **commitment** as a Conference to live into a **radical trust** -- a trust that frees congregations to make the best decisions for their own communities' needs and concerns."

They invite us to find our own calling in the work of offering God's hospitality here on earth.

Wow - what an opportunity. And with this privilege comes responsibility.

Responsibility that asks us to be aware of how our whiteness, for our conference is made up largely of people from the dominant culture, how that whiteness impacts our engagement and giving.

As persons from the dominant culture, we have a legacy of not respecting the ways of all our brothers and sisters (reference Ruths' intro...)

we have not listened well to the invitation to walk beside,

honoring,

learning from those with different ways of being in the world.

I, we, have much to learn about how these actions and inactions, harm and prevent God's justice.

The conference gathering had few answers and many questions for us as we begin this journey of discernment surrounding use of funds. We have work to do - learning to do, and maybe more importantly, unlearning to do, as we join Jesus in this work of dismantling the systems of oppression that surround us.

The prophet Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. pointed again and again to this transformational work of changing our world. In a 1967 speech, he said

"On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."²

We must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed...

We might take those words of Dr. King and say, this transformational work comes to see that a system which allows widows to give away their last coins is a system that needs to be transformed - rebuilt.

My friends - we have an opportunity to learn,
to unlearn,

and to discover together ways in which to join in the transformational work of living out the Good News, here and now. May God's grace lead us on.

² MLK Jr. 1967. "A Time to Break Silence," at Riverside Church.