

***A sermon preached on November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018 – Veterans Day – the week after the election – and the week before Stewardship Sunday, based upon Mark 12:38-44.***

I want to begin by calling attention to something I love about our church. There are a lot of congregations in our country where everybody belongs to the same political party and have convinced themselves that God is either a Republican or a Democrat.

This isn't one of those churches.

On Election Day I posted on the Church Facebook Group a message encouraging you all to vote knowing that to some extent your votes would cancel one another's out. But that wasn't the point. Voting is an expression of care for our community and the larger world. This is a truth particularly worth noting on Veterans Day since so many gave their lives to preserve the freedoms that are ours in a democracy, and to fail to vote dishonors that for which they died.

In the psalm 146 is one of the readings for today, and it contains this line: *“Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.”* The verse is an exaggeration – a good leader can indeed provide help. But the point I would take this verse to mean is that as important as the issues are over which we may disagree, it is important to remember that no politician is ever going to be able to solve all our problems.

One of the reasons that political parties cycle in and out of office is that there is a underlying discontent that comes with being a human being. The remedy for this discontent ultimately lies in the spiritual realm rather the political. Nonetheless, we look to our political leaders to cure what ails us and regularly turn them out of office when they fail to do so.

The quality of our communal life is similarly based upon whether or not the leadership as well as the citizenry truly care about the greater good of the community.

We celebrate diversity and inclusion in our church and in the present age one of the forms of inclusions that is becoming increasingly less common is an inclusion that encompasses people who disagree with us about politics.

So I'm glad our “room in the circle” extends to differences of political opinions. It is a beautiful thing.

The story of the poor widow giving her two copper coins in the Temple treasury is a familiar one. The image we project on the wall each Sunday during our offering are intended to represent the poor widow's hands with her two coins.

But there is more going on in this story than is typically recognized. In the first portion of our passage we hear Jesus go on a rant against certain scribes – the religious authorities involved in administrating the Temple. “Beware of the scribes,” he said. They are all

about themselves. They don't truly care about their community. In fact, they "devour widow's houses." In other words, they take everything these poor, vulnerable widows have, and they will be severely judged for doing so.

The fact that the story of the poor widow giving her last two cents to the Temple treasury occurs immediately after this condemnation leads some scholars to wonder about the whole notion of lifting up this poor widow as an example of good stewardship. Perhaps Jesus' point is to say, "*See? These scribes have convinced this poor widow that if she wants to be right with God she has to turn over to them every last cent. They should be ashamed of themselves.*"

And yet just a few verses before this Jesus has had a positive interaction with a very honorable scribe – one who was impressed by the answers had given to others who had been trying to trip him up. This scribe asks Jesus a sincere question: *Of all the 524 laws in the Torah which is the most important one?* Jesus responds by giving not one but two commandments: We are to love God and love our neighbors. The scribe praises the answer Jesus has given declaring that such love "*is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.*" To which Jesus declares, "*You are not far from the kingdom of God.*"

So it would be wrong to conclude that when Jesus condemns some scribes he is condemning all scribes, or that he is condemning wholesale the religious institution that centered on the Temple. When Jesus drove out the money changers he wasn't trying to destroy the Temple but rather to reform how it was administered.

Jesus recognized the need for institutions, imperfect though they always will be to organize our communal life. The institution centered on the Temple – just like the institutional church -- should be about the business of helping people grow in their love of God and neighbor.

I think this passage is about stewardship, though perhaps not so much in the way we usually think of it.

In ancient Israel religion provided the only "safety net" there was. The Torah commanded that to be faithful to God we must care for the widows and the orphans – the poor and the strangers -- the most vulnerable among us. The poor widow gives what little she has trusting that this institution whose mission statement is to follow God's commands will be faithful to its calling – that it will be there for her in her time of need. So the question raised in this passage is whether we will be good stewards of the institution passed on to us.

Our reading this morning calls attention to the dangers of turning our religion into a kind of public performance that is ultimately about calling attention to ourselves rather than to God. After calling out the pretenses of certain scribes, Jesus takes a seat across from the treasury to watch as people dropped their offering. In those days there was no paper money; it was all coins of various size and density. The two copper coins would have

barely made a sound as the widow dropped them into the metal bin. In contrast, heads would turn at the loud sounds made when the rich dropped their bronze, gold and silver coins. People knew who gave a lot, and who didn't.

Of course, they didn't know the level of sacrifice involved in the offerings. Only God knows that.

In our church the only person who knows for sure what somebody has given is the Financial Secretary, thereby lessening the potential for making our giving a public performance for the sake of gaining praise and status.

The poor widow gave sacrificially, mirroring the sacrificial giving that Jesus will shortly demonstrate when he offers his whole life on the cross. Beyond the gaze of those who might praise us, we are each called to give sacrificially, those who are better off financially and those less so. To those to whom much is given, much is expected, but something is expected of all.

We offer our gifts in the trust that the church will be there for us in our times of need in all its forms, whether financial, emotional or spiritual. We recognize that life is fragile, and we can't make it alone, and if we have the good fortune in the present moment to be stable in all these ways, unless we are fools we know a time will come when we too be in need of our faith community's support.

In the end, this story is a reminder that God sees what we overlook. Jesus – God incarnate -- sees the poor widow who is so easily overlooked. God calls us as the church to see them as well and hear their cries. Immediately after this story, the disciples will marvel to Jesus about the sight of the beautiful huge stones that make up the Temple which would seem to be making the point regarding how easy it is for us to get distracted from what truly matters – to overlook the suffering of the least among us.

But God sees us and God truly cares. God knows our struggles and God knows our gifts. There is reassurance and grace in this knowledge, but there is also a great challenge put to us as well. God is calling us to be faithful with our gifts, our time and our talents, that the church that was passed on to us may be passed on to others. To be faithful in keeping our focus on loving God and neighbor because in the end that alone is what matters.