

Yr. B, Proper 27
November 11, 2018
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1522 Words

Lessons: 1 Kings 17:8-16
Psalm 146
Hebrews 9:24-28
Mark 12:38-44

“Beware of those who like to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,” said Jesus. “They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.”

On Wednesday I listened to this very story while exercising at the YMCA. It was a featured story in one of my favorite podcasts, *This American Life*.

An elderly woman named Marge was an easy target for telemarketing scams. People who pretended to be ‘respectable’ conned her out of a lot of money. Two thousand years after Jesus said “Beware!” very little has changed. Widows are still vulnerable and predators feigning respectability are still on the prowl.

I listened to an actual recording of the scam artist—David—as he tried to take everything Marge owned. I normally work the elliptical at 65 or 70 RPM. Yet, as I listened to David pressure an old lady to invest everything, my anger boiled and my pace quickened. If you want to feel flat out angry, just listen to someone “respectable” attempting to steal everything from an elderly widow. “Marge,” he said. “Either invest everything you have—every nickel; or don’t invest at all.” I gnashed my teeth. I could see my heartrate on the elliptical machine’s monitor as it climbed.

“This is exactly what Jesus felt,” I thought to myself. In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus is positively furious...and for good reason. We should all be as furious at injustice as Jesus is. We should all be as angry and outspoken about hypocrisy as Jesus is.

An FBI agent was interviewed about this \$40 million fraud committed by David and others over the course of seven years. The agent was part of the team that conducted the raid on David’s home. It appeared he had become a ‘born again Christian.’ There were religious tracks on his desk and religious posters on his walls. The authorities discovered he had given significant amounts of fraudulent wealth to his church.

This story I heard in the gym is so biblical! This is the very same injustice presented in Mark’s Gospel as Jesus points his finger at the legal, political, and religious authorities to call out their hypocrisy, dishonesty, and greed. We should not be surprised that within days, Jesus is handed over by these very same people to be arrested and crucified. The thing crooks hate most is having light shined upon their dark deeds.

Well, the story I heard on *This American Life* came with a beautiful twist. The modern story of Marge turned out better than the ancient story of Jesus. You see, Marge’s phone number got passed around to so many con men that the FBI stepped in and took her phone before she lost everything. So the taped recordings I heard on the podcast were actually recordings of calls made by David to an FBI informant who was *pretending to be Marge*.

Oh yes! And she was so good at her job—conning the con man—that I wanted to cheer...which would have looked really stupid on that elliptical machine as my heart was pounding 145 beats per minute.

The Gospel is like that. It should make us want to cheer that the Lord we follow is willing to stand up for the weak and vulnerable. It should make our hearts pound that the Lord we follow is willing to speak truth to power, even when it cost him his life.

The Lord we follow has shown us how “thoughts and prayers” involve much more than private, wishful thinking. Thoughts and prayers should lead us to words and deeds which look more and more like the words and deeds...of Jesus. The One to whom we pray most sincerely will inspire the way we will follow more nearly.

So let’s take a look at what Jesus said and did *next*. According to St. Mark, Jesus sat down to watch the crowd put their money into the treasury. Now, *that’s awkward!* Imagine Jesus looking over *our shoulders* as we write our checks on Sunday morning! Remember, he was not a priest or a scribe. Jesus had no official authority to be monitoring peoples’ donations. He was just curious.

Once again, Jesus was *not* minding his own business. Once again, Jesus was talking about the uncomfortable subject of money. Once again, Jesus was paying attention, and telling the truth. And the truth was this: the *only* person Jesus praised was the poorest person in the room, the most vulnerable person in the room—the widow.

Maybe she had been a victim of fraud by some of those men walking around in long robes and saying long prayers. Yet, Jesus did not praise the widow *because* she was poor or vulnerable. He praised her because she was generous—outrageously generous.

I want to share another story I heard this week about a widow named Mary. Mary lived in a modest house. She drove an average automobile. She loved her regular old dog that she rescued from the pound. Mary did not draw attention to herself...any more than the ancient widow who stooped down to drop two small copper coins into the treasury.

The gift *that widow* deposited into one of the thirteen trumpet-shaped chests in the Jewish Temple resounded not only in Jesus’ hearing, but also in his heart. Calling his disciples over, Jesus added his own fanfare to that of the trumpet-shaped chest with the clinking of copper coins. “Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than anyone else.”

We have to be careful with this story. I need to make one thing crystal clear—Jesus is not encouraging the poor to give *more* than they can *safely* give. Rather, Jesus is shaming the wealthy for giving *less* than they can *easily* give.

The point of this uncomfortable teaching is not to lay guilt on other poor widows to throw in their last penny. No. The point of Jesus’ uncomfortable teaching is to totally re-form everyone else’s understanding of generosity.

Those who have the nice clothes and homes...those who have the best seats at banquets (or ballgames or restaurants)...those of us who are accustomed to being greeted with respect...we should not get carried away thinking that Jesus is impressed by the 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5% that many Christian donors give away.

The point of Jesus’ uncomfortable teaching is to challenge even those of us who donate 6, 7, 8, 9 or 10% of our income to recognize that there are always others who give so much more, even when it rattles like two copper coins. *Nobody* gets to walk away from this lesson feeling justified...or superior to anyone else, and especially toward the most poor, vulnerable and generous people in our world.

With two thousand years of opportunity to learn and grow, it is still perfectly legal to exploit the poor. It is still normal for the best seats to go to the most affluent. It is still expected that the highest honors will be given to the most connected. It is still politically correct to look down upon, demean, and dismiss the very people whom Jesus and the prophets took every opportunity to lift up, support, acknowledge and say—unequivocally—to the rest of us. “Open wide your hand to the poor. Give liberally.” Or as Jesus uncomfortably suggests in today’s lesson: “Give like the poor widow gives.”

We all have to decide what to put in the treasury. What Jesus has decided *for us* is that we should put our pride on the shelf. We should put any feelings of being justified or superior on the shelf. In the end, we are going to leave it all behind, anyway.

So, about a year ago a colleague of mine went to see the elderly widow named Mary. He was new to the church, and was making his way around to visit all the homebound folks in his new parish. After saying hello and covering all the pleasantries, Mary asked the young priest a simple question: “What is your dream for our congregation?”

The priest did not hesitate. “My dream is for this congregation to nurture and develop children and youth to follow the way of Jesus.” Mary smiled. The elderly widow had been quietly and generously invested in that same vision for many years.

Several months later Mary died.

This morning my colleague is announcing to his congregation that Mary left an extraordinary gift for the children and youth of that parish from now on. She bequeathed \$926,000 to the permanent endowment for the perpetual benefit of children and youth. Do you think that congregation will hear *those copper coins* landing in the treasury? My guess is that in the end she gave everything she had, just like the woman in today’s Gospel story.

Dear people of St. Peter’s, for goodness’ sake, don’t be afraid to dream. And for goodness’ sake don’t be afraid of being generous with the mission of Jesus Christ. While he never pressures anyone to be irresponsible, Jesus always celebrates those whose words and deeds and gifts flow generously from their thoughts and prayers and dreams.

Amen.