

25th Sunday after Pentecost B 10 November 2024

Mark 12:38-44

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace to you and peace from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Jesus said to his disciples, *“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.”* Let's pray: ...

The local church was in terrible shape. The paint was peeling, the gardens choked with weeds, the hymn books tattered and torn. The walls were cracking and plaster had fallen from the ceiling. So, the pastor called a meeting to do something about it and he invited, among others, the richest man in town.

He spoke at length to the rich man and others, but couldn't get any commitment. Finally, he said, “Let's pray.” The pastor prayed fervently to God to give them a sign that would melt the hearts of these stone-hearted people, especially the rich man. Well, the Lord answered him. Suddenly, an enormous piece of plaster fell directly onto the head of the wealthy man. He leapt to his feet and exclaimed, “I'll give \$20,000.00!” Emboldened by this response the pastor said, “Hit him again, Lord, hit him again!”

So, hands up if you think you're in for an earbashing this morning about committing more to the offering plate. For \$100.00, you get the ten-minute sermon. For \$50.00, you get the thirty-minute sermon. For \$5.00, you'd better get really comfortable and cancel your dinner reservations. Too far?

Seriously though, it's very easy to overlook what this teaching is about at its deepest level. It's not about the scribes, it's not about money, and it's not even about the poor widow. This teaching is about Jesus and the riches of his poverty.

The widow's action, provided Jesus with an excellent opportunity to teach how his own life is the ultimate illustration of what God's kingdom is all about. True power isn't found in human delusions of grandeur, but in Christ who knows exactly who he is and chose to give up everything for us (Philippians 2).

As much as ever, humanity desperately needs someone to look up to. How should I live? How do I treat members of the opposite sex? How do I treat my children? What sort of man or woman should I try to be? Who are my neighbours, and how do I treat them? Sadly, it's hard to think of a current head of state anywhere in the world who's an outstanding example of courage, wisdom, integrity and restraint.

Thankfully, God comes to our rescue. The poor widow is an excellent example but Jesus is the whole story. While the widow gave everything she had to live on, Jesus gave up everything, including heaven and his very life, for us! Jesus emptied himself of his divinity in order to serve, and through his death, save us. He is God's great definition of a man – the 'proper man' as Luther calls him. Luther, as much as anyone, knew that true richness isn't found in material things; rather, in the poverty of our spirit.

But how do the two go together? Richness and poverty sound like opposites, don't they? Our minds immediately go to comparisons between those who live in mansions and those who are homeless. Or those who dine in fine restaurants and the poor who scavenge their leftovers from rubbish bins. They don't fit together in our minds because we're conditioned to think of poverty in terms of lack, deficiency, scarcity, and a problem requiring a solution. Something that rich nations should help poor nations to overcome. Why then, does Jesus counsel us with these words, "You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me" (Matthew 26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12:8)?

The widow's poverty isn't a problem to be fixed. Rather, her example provides a foretaste of 'Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross' (Philippians 2:5-8).

It is from the depths of Christ's poverty that the richness of God's love - the source of true power and glory, is shared with us.

The "poor" widow exemplifies spiritual poverty. She has no desire to join *Fortune* magazine's rich list. She doesn't crave opulence, or respect in her community. She doesn't pretend to be holy or demand the balcony box at the opera. Her desire to have, is absent. Out of her poverty, the poor widow gives God all she has. What else does a poor widow have to give? She has only the riches of poverty. Her action embodies the essence of the "Great Exchange": Jesus' rich grace for the poverty of our sin; his righteousness and love for our guilt and shame.

The "riches of poverty" is a spiritual condition that comes from letting go. By recklessly abandoning everything, the widow shows us that authentic spirituality, connection to Jesus, following as his disciple, is about letting go. Letting go of self-centred characteristics that mask our true identity. Letting go of: comparison, competition, expectation, judgement, status, reputation, appearances; the need for power, control, success, to win, to be right; our need for approval and the illusions we create or buy in order to make ourselves feel better. It means letting go of everything; even our own self-perception and those we love most. Ultimately, it means emptying out the clutter of our sin to make room for Jesus.

But emptying ourselves isn't the same as decreasing our value. Everything is worth whatever someone is willing to pay for it. So I ask you: How much do you reckon you're worth to God? St Peter says, "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:18,19). The precious blood of Jesus covers every one of our sins – even our sins of loving the gifts more than the Giver. If God was willing to bankrupt heaven in order to adopt you as his own child, then you can be certain that you are precious to him and that he truly, deeply, madly loves you.

Jesus didn't desperately cling to life. He gave up heaven, emptied himself, humbled himself, and opened his hands. He didn't open his hands to gather wealth, but to grab some nails to pay for our sins. The true treasure, the profound truth of the gospel, is that through faith in Jesus Christ, if you were able to see yourself through God's eyes, you wouldn't recognise yourself. In Christ, you are holy, perfect, God's own treasured, dear child. The record of your sins – shredded. Only Jesus appears on the ledger. Saints, do I hear a "Yes, Amen!"

Spiritual poverty is all about letting go and I'll let you in on a little secret – it's not easy to do. Who wants to feel vulnerable, open, and be reminded of how fragile this life really is? Spiritual poverty exists on the fine line between life and death where there're no certainties – only faith, no answers – only hope, and no security – only love. Faith, hope, and love. These three things are the poor widow's address. It's where she lives. It's where God lives. It's where perfect unity and peace live.

The poor widow's face – the face of spiritual poverty – is a mirror in which the Messiah recognises himself. In the poverty of our spirit, Jesus sees and recognises himself - 'For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich' (2 Corinthians 8:9). My dear sisters and brothers, that's called grace; God's grace, writ large: G-R-A-C-E; God's Riches At Christ's Expense. Frankly, Saints, there's nothing more powerful or more glorious. So let's go all in! Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.