

Pentecost 24B 07 November 2021
Mark 12:38-44
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Teaching in the temple, Jesus said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 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."

"Don't be like them; learn from her; be like Jesus." True riches are to be found in the poverty of our spirit. That's a quick summary of today's message. Let's pray:

There are people everywhere who will happily pile on when someone accuses the church of caring only about money. It's not an unfounded accusation. The Church's history is littered with grabs for land, money, power, and control. And it continues to flourish today. There are plenty of religious con-artists out there whom are extremely adept at draining bank accounts in the name of Jesus. There are preachers who care more about lining their pockets than proclaiming the gospel. And, there seem to be plenty of people happy and willing to accommodate their pastor's apparent need for opulence. There should be little wonder that so many people view the clergy as "robbers in robes". Beware of the scribes. (By the way, I accept cash, stocks, bonds, gold, and all major credit cards... joking!)

Over and against this, we hear the account that is popularly known as the “widow’s mite.” The simplistic view is that the poor widow is an example of generosity and we should be generous like her. I reckon you’ve heard that or something like it before. We’re not surprised when this text is trotted out for fundraising in the church when we need just that little bit of extra leverage to loosen our wallets. Or we find it handy to roll out when we criticise the rich for not giving more. And it brings into stark contrast the unequal and unfair distribution of the world’s resources reminding us that many in the world live without enough – enough money, food, shelter, electricity, education, healthcare, love.

All of that is valid. There’s truth in all of those interpretations. But we need to dig deeper into the scriptures to uncover the rich pearls of the gospel. There’s something much greater going on in this story. This gospel isn’t simply about the treasury of money. It is, rather profoundly, about the treasure trove of poverty.

The riches of poverty. It sounds contradictory; an example of paradox. The riches of poverty. They don’t fit together in our way of thinking because we tend to think of poverty as something lacking; a problem that needs addressing, a problem to be eradicated. Something that rich nations should help poor nations to overcome. Riches conjure up images of material abundance, whereas, poverty draws our attention to deficiency. But not in today’s gospel.

The poverty of the poor widow isn’t a problem to be fixed. The poverty Jesus is referring to is an internal virtue; the source of true power and glory. The poor widow is, in reality, our teacher, and schools us in the theology of the Cross: ‘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).

The “poor” widow embodies the quality of spiritual poverty. She has no desire to be rich in a monetary sense. She doesn’t crave fine linen, or respect in her community. She doesn’t pretend to be holy or demand the balcony box at the opera. Her need to have, is absent. What she does makes no sense. She gives her last two coins. “She out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.” Literally, the poor widow gives her life. What else does a poor widow have to give? She has no abundance, only the riches of poverty. And yet, she embodies the essence of the great exchange: Jesus’ rich grace for her poverty in sin, his righteousness for her guilt [see 2 Corinthians 5:21].

The riches of poverty is a spiritual condition that comes from letting go. Authentic spirituality, connection to Jesus, being his disciple, is about letting go. Letting go of self-centred characteristics that mask our true identities. 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. Ultimately, it means letting go of everything, including ourselves and those we love most. It means emptying ourselves - getting rid of the clutter of our poverty in sin to make room for Jesus.

Emptying ourselves isn’t the same as lessening our value. Everything is worth whatever someone is willing to pay for it. So, how much are you 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 to adopt you as his own child, then you know that you’re worth everything to him.

Jesus didn’t hoard possessions or desperately cling to life with a tight grip. He emptied himself, humbled himself, and opened his hands. He opened his hands not to gather up wealth, but to grab hold of a couple of 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, his own dear child. The record of your sins is blotted out, and there’s only Jesus on your side. Is that good news, saints? “Yes! Amen”.

Spiritual poverty, giving up your life, begins with letting go, which is difficult to do. It leaves us open, vulnerable, and always reveals how fragile this life really is. It puts us 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. This is where the poor widow lives. This is where God calls home. In the face of the poor widow – the face of spiritual poverty – the Messiah sees and recognises himself. In the poverty of your 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). Amen.

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