"All In"

A Sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork

Bay Shore Community Congregational Church – November 17, 2024

Twenty-sixth Sunday After Pentecost – Lesson: Mark 12:38-44

Gracious God, may you meet us in this time of worship, may you guide and inspire us in our walk of faith, open our hearts and our hands to our neighbors near and far, and lead us onward in the Way of Jesus. Amen.

Today, as we continue our exploration of some of the key stories of Jesus in Mark's gospel, we find Jesus and his disciples in Jerusalem where Jesus is teaching in the temple courtyard. It's the last week of Jesus' earthly life, mere days from his arrest and crucifixion. Just yesterday, Jesus went into the temple and turned over the tables of the moneychangers, disrupting the temple system in an act of protest against corruption, injustice, and collusion with the Roman Empire.

So today, Jesus has a target on his back. But he returns to the city and to the temple to teach anyway. And the crowds offer him a certain level of protection, at least for a few days.

As he teaches, Jesus doesn't back down from his critique. "Beware of the scribes," he starts off. Beware of people who like to strut around town in fancy clothes, who expect to receive special treatment in public at the market and in private at dinner parties. They make a show of going to the synagogues and they recite long prayers devoid of any real prayerful intention in order to make themselves look good. But their prideful piety is a façade, Jesus warns. Behind closed doors and in the shadows of society, they are actively devouring widows' houses.

It's a pretty scathing critique. And maybe this isn't totally fair of Jesus. Not all scribes fit this description. After all, just a little earlier in this chapter, Jesus commended the wisdom of a scribe who expressed agreement with him that loving God and loving one's neighbor is more important that just about anything else. Was that man the exception? Or were there others? Was he doing his best to live out this call to love? If so, could he or would he be courageous like Jesus and call out the injustice in the system that propped up his own status?

As we hear this story, we should be aware that, from a socio-economic standpoint, most of us probably have more in common with the scribes than with Jesus, his disciples, or the widow in this story.

And, as in many societies throughout history, in Jesus' day, there was a class of people who enjoyed the benefits of wealth, social status, and proximity to the powers in charge. Unfortunately, that kind of system allowed people to ignore (at minimum) or actively exploit the peasant class for their own gain. Under Roman rule, some of the scribes and temple authorities of Jerusalem were lured in and caught up in this kind of unjust system.

In that culture, it was also common for men to appoint other men (sometimes family members) to manage their estate after their death. Scribes were well-connected and well-versed in the law, so many may have ended up in such a role. And so, many widows were at the mercy of the men left

in charge of their household. Hopefully, some were ethical and understood that their job was to be providers for and protectors of widows (and their children if they were still at home). But others took advantage of widows, exploited their hospitality, squandered their resources, and (to quote Jesus) "devoured" their houses.

Those whose unethical practices padded their own pockets and boosted their social status absolutely should have known better. They have no excuse. They knew the law and they knew that the mandate to care for the widows and orphans in their midst was at the very heart of their faith. It has been taught to them by their own prophets for centuries.

And now we find Jesus carrying forth that prophetic message and using this concrete example of unethical scribes as a warning, to say to his disciples and followers: If you are primarily focused on seeking personal gain, power, wealth, status, and flattery, you have missed the point. If you are willing to misuse the name of God and your religious identity to prop up unjust and unethical situations and systems, you have missed the point. If you are content to sit on the sidelines while those on the margins get devoured by the powerful, you have missed the point.

The point is to love God and love your neighbor. The point is to care for, serve, and seek justice for all, especially for those in need, for those on the margins.

So then, Jesus goes and sits down in front of the temple treasury where people were coming to pay their temple taxes and give their free will offerings. Rich people come and go, making substantial donations. And we're probably not talking about the wealthiest or most powerful elites here. But those with enough means for a good life.

And then, along comes a poor widow who puts her last two tiny coins, all that remains of her livelihood, into the collection box.

"She gave *more* than anyone else," Jesus says to his disciples. Everyone else gave out of their abundance and had plenty to spare. But she gave all that she had left.

Why *did* she give her last two coins to the temple treasury, I wonder. Did she feel obligated? Did she feel she had nothing left to lose, so why hold on to two tiny coins? Had she *given up all hope* for her own future? Or was it that she was *clinging to hope* that God could and would help her?

We can't know the inner workings of this woman's mind. And perhaps her motivations were mixed. Author and historian, Diana Butler Bass, has an interesting and compelling take on this woman's motivation. She thinks this was an act of protest. Perhaps this widow lost everything because of the very system Jesus had just been critiquing.

Maybe in her righteous anger, this woman (who has nothing left to lose) is saying: "See these last two coins? You've taken everything else, but you can't take these from me. I'm freely giving them to God. You should be ashamed of yourselves." In publicly giving away all that she has left she is exposing the injustice she and others have endured. And it is an act of lament, calling out to anyone who will bear witness, anyone who will listen, "do you care?"

And, of course, it is Jesus who bears witness; Jesus who cares and sees what is going on. And he calls his disciples' attention to her. And, in doing so, Jesus is both commending her faithfulness as well as calling his disciples and followers to take notice of her circumstances and her call for justice.

Jesus' praise for the widow's generosity does not ignore the social conditions that have contributed to her poverty. We have to see this moment in light of his critique of the unjust scribes. We have to hold both together.

And we're left wondering: how will the disciples respond? How will we respond?

Jesus lifts up this woman as an example of generous and honest faith because she has gone *all in* – laying everything bear before God and anyone in her community who will take notice. Perhaps Jesus also sees some of himself in this woman. He's in the process of going *all in* too.

Will the disciples be willing and learn how to go *all in*? Will we?

Once again, we probably can't help but remember that rich man from chapter ten (I know we keep coming back to that guy; you can blame the gospel writer 😊 – there's a thread that weaves through all of these stories). That man struggled to go *all in* even though he longed for an open-hearted, loving faith.

In contrast, the widow is lifted up as another example of someone who gets it.

And, for us, it is in the process of living out our discipleship and discerning our call to an open-hearted loving faith that we discover what this means in our lives.

How do we let our lives be shaped by God's priorities rather than by the misguided priorities of the powers and principalities that have historically shaped human civilization; priorities that have skewed our societies towards hierarchy, division, and unjust social stratification; priorities that still have a lot of influence in our world.

It is a question of how we choose to dedicate our daily lives to loving God and loving our neighbors. That's always the question, isn't it?

It is a question of how we choose to generously give from the heart to respond to the real needs in the world around us, to care for the marginalized, the vulnerable, the widows and orphans in our midst.

And it is a question of how we stand with those who are standing up for justice, those like the widow, who are calling out to those around them to pay attention to their plight. How will we use our resources, time, and very bodies to stand with people and against the unjust systems and structures that have pushed them to the margins?

The reality is that there are always people in our midst who are living on the margins. There are always people who feel vulnerable and feel attacked as the "other." And there are always people,

who, in spite of and in the midst of these experiences of vulnerability, courageously stand up for justice for all and invite our participation in their pursuit.

So, perhaps now is as good a time as any to take a deeper look at the world around us and look for people like the widow – to take notice of them, to listen to their stories, to try to understand their concerns and challenges, to hear what they are asking of us, and to respond to their needs in whatever ways we can.

Now is as good a time as any to listen to the experiences of the working poor in our communities and learn about their struggles to make ends meet. And now is a good time to provide some food for hungry people and to help some families in need in our community.

Now is a good time for those of us who are U.S. citizens by birth to listen to and try to understand the varied experiences, perspectives, and needs of our immigrant neighbors and to discern how best to respond with compassion and support.

Now is a good time for straight and cisgender people to stand with our LGBTQ+ siblings and let them know that they are loved and affirmed.

Now is a good time for those of us with plenty to give some of our resources to people and organizations that are pursuing justice for our planet and for our global neighbors who have been most devastated by ecological destruction.

And now is a good time to listen to one another deeply, compassionately, and with an open-heart. The unjust structures of our world have always thrived on division and isolation, on misinformation and misrepresentation of people. We need an alternative. And I deeply believe that building caring community is an essential step in the journey to a more just world for all. Church can help us in this pursuit; as can interfaith and community-wide engagement.

Now is a good time to go *all in*.

I like to hope that the disciples (or someone in that crowd of Jesus' followers that day) did something to respond with love to that widow after Jesus drew their attention to her. Sure, they were pretty far from home and maybe didn't have all that much to offer her. But maybe they could have bought her a meal. Maybe they could have made sure she had a safe place to stay.

It's not a perfect solution. But it's a start; it's a step. And maybe that's what it's all about.

There's a well-known commentary on Micah 6:8 that offers the following wisdom for our days:

"Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now. Love mercy now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

Amen.