

Sermon for the Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
November 7, 2022
St. Michael's Episcopal Church
The Reverend Canon Michael J. Horvath
Mark 12:38-44

The fall of 2016 marked a time in my life when I started to really think about my store of spiritual resources and the resiliency of what I had in my life with Christ. It was a pivotal moment where our nation's political landscape seemed to be turned on its head, where truth was seemingly devalued, and facts became mere suggestions of truth. My desire to seek and argue for the truth and trying to persuade people of that truth got me into more needless debates and discussions, which left me frustrated and bewildered at our nation's increasing inability to tackle important issues intellectually and compassionately.

So, I thought, what if I ratchet it back a bit? Rather than trying to get my viewpoints across, I started to simply listen to the opposing viewpoints people were trying to get across to me. It didn't mean that I believed what they were saying, but I became more interested in the quality of the conversations that I was having. Where I sensed that someone was deeply thinking about issues, I, in turn, made myself even more vulnerable by questioning my own viewpoints as we walked through difficult conversations together. Looking back on it, those discussions were full of give and take, shared hopes, and middle grounds. Where I felt that there was going to be no mutuality in the discussion, or where sophistry was simply masking bigotry, I kicked the dust off my feet and moved on. I don't mean to come across as smug or better-than. I'm not. It wasn't due to disinterest, or misplaced loyalty, or ego – those never serve to build relationships. Instead, I came to an understanding that God asks me to use my gifts, my life, to the fullest and I needed to figure out how to cut through the unnecessary weeds and focus on God's call. And I have to tell you, this mindset serves me well as a priest, too! Sanity is a highly desirable character trait in a rector.

A friend recently told me that he has fully taken on this mindset as well. He said, "I'm at that stage in my life where I keep myself out of unnecessary arguments. So even if you tell me $1+1=5$, you're absolutely correct. Enjoy."

In both our cases, I think God was calling on us again to figure out the essentials in our lives. And if I didn't listen for God's voice, it would have passed me by, and I would have been spinning wheels.

I think stripping ourselves of the non-essentials is what today's Gospel reading is about as well. This is the parable we usually know as "widow's mite." The lesson we all have come to understand is that this poor widow is an example of generosity, and we should be generous like her. This is the stewardship teaching par excellence, reminding us that there's more to give. Or criticizing us for not giving more. It also highlights the increasing income inequality in our world and the unbalanced distribution of resources that leaves a majority of the world without enough money, food, shelter, education, healthcare.

In the right hands, these are very valid interpretations that should lead us to a new understanding of the stewardship of what God has given us. But this is not only about stewarding our assets and having. This is about what we do when we are stripped down to nothing, where we experience a poverty of spirit.

Remember Jesus's Sermon on the Mount in chapter 5 of Matthew's Gospel? "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Who wants to live a life where we experience poverty of spirit? Who wants to be this poor widow, giving up her last dollar, not knowing where her next meal will come from, or whether she will be thrown out of her home for failure to pay rent? She probably was thinking the same thing, "When will I be able to eat again? How will I afford something warm to wear this winter?" But if we look closely at what she does in today's gospel, we all should want to be her. At her lowest, at her poorest, she is stripped of everything our world holds dear – wealth, status, perhaps looks, family connections. And in that poverty of spirit, she finds wealth in faith. She may not have been the most spiritual person before, but today her faith has led her to put her money, as little as it appears to be, on God.

The absence of her need to have becomes her need not to have. So, she does what makes no sense, and what feels holy. She gives her last two coins. "She out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." For what else does a poor widow have to give? She has no abundance, only the riches of poverty.

Her sense of faith, indeed her spiritual life, is now laid bare and peeled back to its essential. Giving all for God, doing all for God. At its most basic, it is about letting go of those things that we believe constitutes the "I", the ego. It's about letting go of expectations, judgement, and comparisons; letting go of a drive to be first, or right; letting go of the need for power, control, to succeed, to win; letting go of our need for approval and perfectionism; letting go of all the illusions we create or buy in order to make ourselves feel better. When we empty ourselves of these nonessentials, that is when we give God the opportunity to fill us up – to enter a state of being where we are at peace, grateful, unworried, and present to one another as God is ever present to us.

I don't want to romanticize this poor widow. Living in this poverty of spirit doesn't mean suffering as we understand suffering. God doesn't want us to suffer needlessly. There is another whole sermon in this passage about the onlooker's responsibility is to that poor widow, but I'll save that when this comes around again in the lectionary.

In this poverty of spirit, we learn to live in the questions, in the grey areas of listening for God's still voice, where having the right answer is not as important as the journey towards that answer. In this poverty of spirit, we don't strive for a better life 10 years from now, we strive for a full, rich and interconnected life with each other now, because the important work that the Holy Spirit is calling us to do is in the now, it is right here before us. In this poverty of spirit,

we come to a fuller understanding of what it means to live like Jesus at this moment and in this place and we can start to focus on helping the Kingdom of God break into our lives.

And know this, if you believe $1+1=5$ and that is essential to you, ok. You're absolutely correct. Enjoy. Amen.