

## **Tradition without Love; Keep your Eye on Her**

Scripture: Mark 12:38-44/Ord 31B

November 8, 2009

Laura Smith Conrad/Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

### **Scripture**

38 As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,

39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!

40 They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums.

42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.

43 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.

44 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."

### **Proclamation of the Word**

Jesus walked inside the corridors of the Temple and took a seat there by the Treasury. It had just been a couple of days ago when the crowds had littered the street with palm branches for his colt to walk over. They waved the branches and shouted "Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Jesus was heralded as a Messiah and marched into the Holy City, the Capital, Jerusalem, for the feast of Passover. He met there with thousands of pilgrims of faith. When he arrived, Jesus went straight to the Temple and looked around at everything. Jesus has been back and forth to the Temple all week long, and it is where we find him today in our lesson.

The day after what we call Palm Sunday, Jesus enters the Temple and sees the moneychangers and people profiting from the faith. He is incensed and turns over the tables. The house of prayer for all peoples has become a den of robbers and thieves. Picture this with me, will you? The Temple Mount was about the size of 2 dozen football fields. 1000s of Jews had gathered there. The Temple was the place where people met the Holy, God himself. The Jews have a phrase for that mount, they call it the "LORD's footstool." I love that image. When I look out in the distance some days on my ride home up Six Mile Hwy., I crest the hill leading toward the lake. I imagine God perched up on that ridge of blue and purple mountains in the distance. God's footstool. The Temple is sacred space. Some have cheapened and distorted this holy place. I imagine during the festival week there in Jerusalem, it may have felt like a bustling Homecoming week in Clemson. Pilgrims come from all over for the festivities. A

space of 2 dozen football fields is filled with pilgrims in RV's, towing grills, and lawn chairs complete with satellite dish. They come festooned in rain ponchos until yesterday. Pilgrims still make journeys today.

Jesus knew he had a purpose that week. He had been looking toward Jerusalem for a long time. All he had done was to lead him to this place where he would redefine "Good Religion" and make God's purposes known. The chief priests and the teachers of the law had gotten wind of him, and they were not pleased. Remember, they were religious leaders, but also interested in keeping civil order. They were to maintain order and keep the tradition as it was. And Jesus challenges that tradition at every turn. He had stirred up quite a following in the countryside, and now he was in their municipality, their backyard.

You see, they had a lot to protect. Solomon's Temple had been destroyed once in 587 BCE when the Babylonians took over, and the children of Israel were sent to live in exile and as servants of another people who followed other gods. King Herod the Great had refurbished the Temple to keep the natives at peace and subdued. They were living in an occupied land. Keeping order was essential and expected by the foreign rulers. Occupied people know what they have to do to survive.

When I read our Scripture today, at first blush, I zoned in on the poor widow who gives everything. And what is a Stewardship Season without hearing the story of the Widow's Mite. It would be like Thanksgiving without a turkey, and Christmas without 6 weeks of Christmas music on the radio stations (how annoying). It really is the scheduled lectionary passage for today's date. I hope you have prayerfully considered how you might respond to God's goodness and grace in your life, through your pledge of commitment to give. Yes, the text is a judgment on the teachers of the law who parade in their long robes and make long prayers. And it is a reminder of the widow who had nothing giving her all. BUT, I think it is mostly about God revealed in Jesus the Messiah, the Christ.

In those extreme makeover shows on television, there is always the Big Reveal. This week described in our Scripture is Jesus' Big Reveal where he redefines the faith. Each day Jesus is a step closer to the cross.

While teaching in the Temple and having conversations, Jesus has one of the most crucial lessons with a teacher of the law who really gets it. The lesson is one of love over law. Jesus confronts the love of ritual without soul and tradition without love.

You see, Jesus has been debating with the Sadducees and the teachers of law over marriage, heaven, taxes...the same things we debate, huh?

Then a teacher of the law who has been listening in, asks Jesus,

“Which commandment is the first of all?”<sup>29</sup> Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;’<sup>30</sup> you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’<sup>31</sup> The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

The teacher of the law agrees with Jesus. It’s about loving God and loving your neighbor. “This is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices,” the teacher rightly responds to Jesus.

It is in this setting that we hear our Scripture today. Jesus says beware of the teachers of the law who want the best seats in the house, to eat at the best banquets, to wear long robes and appear impressive so they can be recognized for their positions. At the same time they devour widow’s houses, taking advantage of them, Jesus says. They are not living the spirit of the law which requires them all to seek justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.

And that is when Jesus takes his seat. He parks himself right in front of the collection box. The large, metal, trumpet-shaped treasury box, where people would bring their coins to dedicate to the work of Temple was right in view. And for a while Jesus observed what was going on. He was known for doing this. He noticed those well-dressed pilgrims coming forward some taking their time to dump the coins and to hear the clanging of the change. It was a noisy- metal coins against metal. That is where Jesus takes a seat.

Then she caught his eye. She was alone and dressed in her widow’s garb. Her hand released 2 little coins and there was no sound. No fanfare. No pats on the back. The ones with plenty had already received recognition. No one noticed the old widow. She did not just tithe her social security check, she gave it all. And Jesus saw her. He noticed the one without rights, without voice, and without possessions. Her status and means of living went away when her husband died. She had ceased to exist. She did live on what the Temple provided for old widows out of the charity box. Why in the world would she give everything she had? It does not make sense.

I am reminded of the widow woman in a church, a very faithful Christian who lived on a small pension. She would tithe her income off the top when the check arrived. It did not make sense. Sometimes she would be out of heating oil at the end of the month. The deacons would arrange to pay for her heating oil every once and awhile. It did not make sense. But to not allow her to give her gift each month would have robbed her of the quiet dignity of giving. She would have missed the chance to share what she had. We talk a lot about grace, but that is what grace is all about. Grace is about responding to God’s love. The deacons at the church knew that. It makes sense in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus praises the widow to his disciples and says, see that is what I am about to do. I am giving my all. I will give my whole self so that God, my Father, might be recognized.

Jesus says, "I have seen the tradition develop and grow, but it is lacking love. It is time for me to follow towards a death, so that in my suffering love, they might know the heart of the God who creates, redeems, and sustains humans and all of creation. God is the source of all they are and all they have. They have gotten things out of whack. I am doing a new thing so they can love the Lord, their God with all their heart, mind and strength. See, they devour widows' houses and have forgotten to care for those most needy around them. They have forgotten to love these neighbors. Only love can reveal the heart of God. She gave with great love. Once they know me and my Father, they cannot help but grow in faith and in generosity. They will seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with us."

In a week when we prepare to remember Veterans of war, we also witness the ravages of war when gunfire breaks out on a military base- soldiers frustrated by 8 years of war, already reeling from the long tours and traumatic stress are subjected to the madness of war in a place where they should feel safe, an Army base. We remember the Veterans and victims of war who do not wear uniforms, the unintended casualties, the families, the innocent, the peacemakers seeking to bring food, build trust, and save lives.

A veteran of WWII is a 98 year-old lady named Irena Sendler. She died in May, 2008. During WWII, Irena, got permission to work in the Warsaw Poland Ghetto, as a Plumbing/Sewer specialist. She had an 'ulterior motive' ... She KNEW what the Nazi's plans were for the Jews. Irena smuggled infants out in the bottom of the tool box she carried and she carried in the back of her truck a burlap sack, (for larger kids.) She also had a dog in the back that she trained to bark when the Nazi soldiers let her in and out of the ghetto. The soldiers of course wanted nothing to do with the dog and the barking covered the kids/infants noises. A network of 24 women and 1 man, mostly Social Workers, called the Zegota network smuggled children underground into hiding to save their lives. During her time of doing this, she managed to smuggle out and save at least kids/infants. She was caught, and the Nazi's broke one of her legs and a foot and beat her severely. Irena kept a record of the names of all the kids she smuggled out and kept them in a glass jar, buried under a tree in her back yard. After the war, she tried to locate any parents that may have survived it and reunite the family. Most parents had been gassed to death. Those kids she helped were placed into foster family homes or adopted. Irena was a Roman Catholic who had friends and neighbors who were Jewish. She was raised by a widow, so she had known the grief of losing her father as a child. She was willing to go against the tradition and authorities of her day in Warsaw in the pursuit of love. She knew the way of life was to love God and to love her neighbors, especially those without rights or voice.

(Note: See <http://www.irenasendler.org/default.asp>)

Jesus said, "Look she has put in everything, most importantly her love. Keep an eye on her. She's the one to notice. She is the one closest to the Kingdom and to the heart of God."

All that we have is a gift, and our greatest joy is in sharing not out of guilt, but out of grace...out of love for God and love of our neighbors. May we keep our eye on the widow...she's the one to watch out for. She points us to God.

So I guess this did turn out to be a Stewardship sermon after all.