

“Just do it!” A sermon by Lee Ireland
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
November 11, 2018, Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 12:38-44

Let us pray together: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

Scribes and widows? Do these two stories go together? Usually the stories we read about Jesus on a Sunday are on one topic. For example, last week, we heard the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Now you heard a story about the scribes and how they dress and how they behave – and then a story Jesus tells about a widow who gave all she had to the church. What is Jesus trying to teach his disciples and us in these two stories that appear to be quite different?

One story is about the scribes, those folks in Jesus’ day who could write and were knowledgeable of the law and could draft legal documents (contracts for marriage, divorce, loans, inheritance, mortgages, the sale of land, and the like).

In Mark, the biography of Jesus we’ve been reading now for several Sundays, scribes are considered Jesus’ opponents. Yet, as you Bible scholars may remember, Matthew describes Jesus’ challengers as the Pharisees, those who carefully followed religious tradition – and you may remember, believed in the resurrection. Who really was Jesus’ adversary – scribes or Pharisees? The scribes were a separate group from the Pharisees. However, a scribe, the person with the legal knowledge, could be a Pharisee. Likewise, a Pharisee could have the same legal knowledge as a scribe. So, most likely Mark and Matthew didn’t mean different groups of people but were referring to men knowledgeable about Jewish law and tradition who would have scrutinized Jesus carefully. That is what we read in the Bible – the challenge by both groups to Jesus’ behavior and teaching.

In today’s scripture Jesus is telling his disciples to beware of – let’s call these folks religious authorities. Jesus wanted those he was teaching to beware of the religious authorities of the day. Why? Because, as we would say today, the scribes didn’t practice what they preached. Jesus says they looked good on the outside in their finery – long flowing robes, yet they were rotten on the inside. They were concerned about themselves and how they looked to the world.

They embezzle money from widows. We can look at widows as a generic term that would stand for the poor and disenfranchised in Biblical times. Widows were a group that the Hebrew people were specifically charged with caring for. Moses states in Exodus (22:22) what God had told him: **You shall not abuse any widow or orphan.** In today’s words we’d say that in Jesus’ day the widows were supposed to be a protected class.

Now, our reading for today moves from scribes to a widow who put all her money, all she had to live on, in the Temple offering box. When Jesus tells the story about the widow, we know that he is in the temple, most likely in the Court of the Women. The Women’s Court was so named because women could not go further into the Temple from there. Both men and women were in the Court of Women. Jewish writings describe the Women’s Court as just over 200 feet square with columns at the four corners.

In front of these columns were the eleven treasure chests of the Temple for the voluntary offerings of money. As today’s reading from Mark says, Jesus **sat down opposite the treasury (the offering boxes), and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury.** As he

observed the widow putting in two small coins, he used her offering as a teaching example. **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.**

Does Jesus commend her for doing so? I didn't read that. Does he say you should give all you have to the church? I didn't read that. In the verses following this story about the widow, Mark records Jesus telling the disciples that the Temple will be destroyed as it was in 70 AD, probably less than 40 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. What was the widow contributing to? She was contributing to support a building that would be leveled in less than 40 years that was managed by the corrupt religious elite – scribes and Pharisees. So when pastors use these verses to ask you to contribute more money to the church, they are on thin ice, as the expression goes. Jesus is not speaking with favor about organized religion in his day.

I'm not telling you not to support this church or other religious groups. It's only this scripture passage I'm commenting on. There are plenty of other places in the Bible that tell you to give your money to help feed the poor and take care of widows and orphans. It's just not this verse.

So, I repeat my question that I started with: What is Jesus trying to teach his disciples and us in these two stories that appear to be quite different?

Do you know people who like to be noticed? Do you know people who dress to be noticed? Perhaps it's a guy who wears a beautifully tailored suit and a sharp tie or a gal who wears stunning, flashy jewelry. Do you know people who like to be recognized? I once worked in an organization where the director always sat on the podium even when she was not speaking or had any part in the program. Her behavior always puzzled me. Did she want to remind people that she was in charge by always being visible?

Is such behavior appropriate for a Christ-follower? From today's reading from Mark, I'd say no it's not. Jesus wants Christ-followers, that would be you and me, to be servants if you are to be great. Not flashy dressers like the scribes who want the best seats in the synagogue. Jesus says: **whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.** (Mark 10:43-44) Unfortunately, many folks today want to be great in this world's kingdom and not in God's world. We are to serve others – and that means taking care of the poor, not taking advantage of them as the religious elite did.

What about the poor widow who gave all she had? The scribes did nothing to take care of her. In fact they took advantage of her. Time and again, the Bible tells us that we are to take care of the widow and the poor. The scribes didn't do that. They were taking care of themselves instead of following what God told them to do. I read the first part of what God told Moses about taking care of widows and orphans. Let me read the verse that follows: **If you do abuse them (that would be the widows and orphans), when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans.** (Exodus 22:23-24) No wonder Jesus, in today's reading from Mark, says of the scribes that: **They will receive the greater condemnation.** God reserves harsh punishment for those who do not take care of the poor, the foreigner, the widow – those often marginalized by society.

I'm not trying to beat you up this Sunday if you dress nicely. In this flip-flop world of casual dress it's nice to see people who care about their appearance. However, the question I would ask each of us – me included – is what is in our heart? Is your heart concerned about others and not yourself? Is your faith in God's power and not in your own power?

Now, as they say, I'm moving from preachin' to meddlin'.

What are you doing to take care of the widow and the orphan, those who are less fortunate than you? For many of us, just considering what to do is overwhelming, the task is so enormous. Where do you start? Don't throw your hands up and do nothing. That's not appropriate behavior. Today I want to suggest a few simple ways you can take action.

First and foremost, read and listen. Too often people only listen to the TV news stations that agree with their views. Too often they seek to read articles that support their views and neglect understanding other points of view. And too often people don't want to listen, truly listen, to an opposing point-of-view. People do not try to understand and listen to how others feel and think. The opposition is simply written off and wrong. Read and listen.

Second, be welcoming. If you can, work at a food bank or serve meals in a homeless shelter. Meet and get to know those less fortunate than you. Treat them as real people with feelings, hopes and needs. Be welcoming.

Three, support those who are doing the work of caring for widows and orphans, the disadvantaged, the foreigner. If you can't physically help out, give what you can to organizations who are working to serve the poor. This church will be doing a food distribution to the families of High School students who live below the poverty line. You are being asked today to help collect food for this distribution and to help put stickers on the bags we are going to use to collect the food. This is one simple way you can help.

What is Jesus trying to teach his disciples and us in these two stories that appear to be quite different? Care for the orphan, the widow, the foreigner, the immigrant, the poor. Why? Because that's what God tells us to do.

May God bless your every effort.