

Letting Go of Shame
A Sermon on Mark 12:38-44
Proper 27
November 11, 2018

Introduction

Jesus has been on the road to Jerusalem, teaching about the values in the kingdom of God. Now he is in Jerusalem at the Temple, and he gives his disciples an object lesson. He has been telling the disciples how kingdom values are different from worldly values. Now he shows them.

This story is called a diptych. A diptych is an ancient writing tablet with two hinged leaves. A diptych also describes a Greek rhetorical device, keeping two things together and comparing them. This text holds scribes and a widow together. Our understanding of each is enhanced by contrasting each with the other.

First Move: The Scribes and the Widow

The Greek word for scribe is γραμματεὺς. It means a man of letters. Someone who could read and write. The first people to read and write in antiquity were the bookkeepers for the king. They kept track of the tax rolls. We don't see reading and writing in antiquity until farmers generated enough agricultural surplus to support a king and his court, and the court would include scribes. The king and his court contributed nothing to the economy and relied upon tribute from farmers to support them. Jewish scribes studied the Law. They were bivocational: lawyers and teachers. I am an heir to the scribes.

“Watch out for the scribes.” Jesus is not condemning all the scribes. We have a positive description of a scribe in last week's text. When the scribe asked Jesus what was the greatest commandment, Jesus said, “Love God with all your heart and all your mind and all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” The scribe responded that carrying out this commandment was greater than all of the burnt offerings and sacrifices. Jesus told the scribe that he was not far from the kingdom of God.

The portrait of scribes in today's text is harsh. They wear long, flowing robes, just as judges and ministers do today. They are trying to command respect by virtue of their position. They desire greetings in the marketplace. People of a lower rank were expected to greet their superiors first. The scribes desire the first seats in the

synagogues and the first couches at feasts. These are the places of honor. The scribes think they deserve to be first.

The scribes are human. They value honor, which the culture teaches. It was an honor and shame culture. Honor was the highest value in the culture. The scribes want to be recognized as the first ones, just as James and John did.

People at the top of society had a special obligation to care for the most vulnerable members of the society: the widow, the orphan and resident alien. The scribes devour the houses of the widow instead of protecting them. They make a show of praying for widows after exploiting them. They are more concerned about pleasing themselves than pleasing God. They will receive the greater judgment because more is expected of them.

That is one side of the diptych. On the other is the widow. Jesus sits opposite the treasury and notices the people as they drop money in the offering box. Everyone is throwing in money. The disciples notice that the rich are throwing in much. Jesus notices the widow. That is a sign of a mystic, to notice people and things that other people don't notice. To closely observe is one aspect of contemplation.

A widow was the most vulnerable person in society. A widow had no one to support her. If she had no sons or if her sons refused to support her, she was forced to rely upon charity.

This widow is described as one poor widow. The Greek word for poor is *πτωχή*. It refers to extreme poverty. It means to be a beggar, dependent on others. It could be translated, the wretchedly poor widow.

The widow is unashamed. She turns to God for support. She tosses two lepta into the offering box. A lepta was the smallest Greek coin, a fraction of a day's wages. It would be like throwing in a couple of quarters today. The author explains that two lepta were equal to a quadrans, which was the smallest Roman coin. Tradition says that the Gospel of Mark was written in Rome, and this is some evidence of that. The author explains by using a Latin coin as a benchmark that the reader would understand.

Jesus holds up the widow as a model to the disciples. She throws in more because she throws in from scarcity, while everyone else throws in from abundance. This is what it looks like to love God with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul and all your strength.

The widow throws in her whole life. In the Gospel of Mark, only Jesus, John the Baptist and the widow throw in their whole lives.

This is the last episode in Jesus' public ministry. The story is turning toward the Passion. The widow foreshadows the Passion.

Second Move: *Via Positiva*

The widow models what Matthew Fox calls the *via positiva*, the positive path in our faith journey. It is the way of awe, delight, amazement, trust. The widow trusts in the goodness of reality.

She is not ashamed that all that she has is two lepta. She knows that her self-worth is not defined by her lack of wealth. She is not afraid to throw in all that she has. She trusts that God will provide. She looks forward to the future with confidence.

Do we depend on God? Do we trust our future to God? Those are good questions for a church that is beginning the transformation process.

Do we have shame that we are a small church? This church began with a magnificent endowment 25 years ago: Melvin and Mae Griffin gave us 10 acres of land on the main road in the fastest-growing part of Edmond. Our land is worth \$2.5 to \$3 million today. What have we done with it? The founders of this congregation had hopes that we would have facilities like First Christian, with a big sanctuary on the road and a walking trail around the perimeter of our property. New Covenant was founded in northwest Oklahoma City five years before Edmond Trinity, and they have 300 in worship today.

I post our attendance and offering online and on the board at the back of the sanctuary. Some weeks it is hard for me to post the attendance online. Do we really want people to know that we only had 13 or 16 or 18 in worship?

How can we be more like the widow? She only had two lepta; we only have 18 in worship.

Brene Brown writes in *Daring Greatly* that narcissism permeates our culture because our culture teaches people that they should be fearful and ashamed of being ordinary. We disengage from people because we believe we are not good enough.

Brene Brown defines spirituality as a deeply held belief that we are inextricably connected to one another by a force greater than ourselves. Owning our worthiness is acknowledging that we are sacred and frees us to connect with others.

Connection is why we are here. We are hardwired to connect with others. It gives purpose and meaning to our lives. Without connection, there is suffering. If we believe that we are good enough, we can engage with people. We can risk being vulnerable with people that we trust. Engaging with people means that we listen to each other. We have empathy for each other. We depend on and trust each other.

The widow trusts that God remains connected to her. The scribe thrives on the opinion of others. The scribes can be shamed. The widow is resilient to shame.

I have seen a rough draft of the assessment report that Rick Morse has written about our congregation. He says that our offering is unusually strong for a congregation our size. We have strong givers in this congregation.

Can we simply accept that we are a small church and still have a strong sense of self-worth? Can we be a model for a small church? Can we think of ourselves as a one-room schoolhouse instead of a mega-church with children's programs?

CeCe says that her kids get the best Sunday School she could hope for. They get all of Cherrie's attention. Halo loves going to Sunday School.

Kaitlyn has the best youth instructor Mary and I could hope for. She gets all of Sarah's attention. Sarah has a M.Div. from Vanderbilt. They discuss the next week's sermon text every Wednesday night. I ask Kaitlyn what they talk about so I can get sermon ideas. Sometimes Sarah helps Kaitlyn with her geometry. She tailors youth activities for things that Kaitlyn is interested in, like the Free to Live Animal Sanctuary.

We have to be honest. We can't just look at the world through rose-colored glasses. I am worried about being sustainable. I feel like I have been pushing a boulder uphill for the past 11 years and that if I stop pushing, the boulder will roll over all of us. We are so small that it takes all the energy of the volunteers to keep us going. When no one has any time, it is hard to start a mission to get the congregation and new members involved in.

We hope that the transformation process will help us become sustainable. We hope that it will help us draw in people that we aren't reaching now, that we can add to our critical mass so that all of us together can push that boulder to the top of the hill so that we can at least be on level ground for a while.

Third Move: Engaging Evangelicals and Young People

This is a brave church. That is what some of you said at the appreciative inquiry last month. Can we stay brave?

Can we be a beacon for open-minded Christians in a conservative town? Can we engage evangelicals? Jesus wasn't a Democrat or a Republican. We leave red and blue at the door when we come into the sanctuary. Green is the color on the church calendar right now. Green is the color in Ordinary Time.

We still need to contrast ourselves with evangelicals, the modern-day scribes who pursue their own political self-interest instead of kingdom values. Not all evangelicals, just the ones who define themselves by their politics.

Robert P. Jones says in *The End of White Christian America* that politics is turning younger generations away from the church. Jones sees the 2016 election as

the death rattle of White Christian America. Trump converted evangelicals who described themselves as values voters into nostalgia voters. He tapped into their anxiety about an uncertain future. Jones compares white Christian evangelical voters to Esau, who traded his inheritance for a pot of stew. Evangelicals have traded their distinctive values for fleeting political power. They have produced a Frankenstein, trying to bring about resurrection through human power instead of relying on the divine spirit. They have created a monstrosity that will only accelerate the exodus of young people from the church.

We should resist the temptation for worldly honor and power. The widow is our model, not the scribes.

Would it bother you to have a few evangelicals in the congregation? We have a few conservatives now; they just don't talk about it. Can we focus on what we have in common in Christ? Can we look to the kingdom of God for our values? Humility, hospitality, generosity, empathy, courage, diversity, respect, mercy, love, forgiveness. Those are not liberal values or conservative values. Those are kingdom values. The church models for the world what the kingdom is like.

That doesn't mean we stop being open and affirming. Being open and affirming reflects kingdom values: hospitality, diversity, respect, love. We can go further with open and affirming. It means we are open to people with different perspectives and we engage them. Not just different political perspectives but different generational perspectives.

Our worship service is designed to appeal to baby boomers and golden agers. What can we do to open it up to younger people? That doesn't necessarily mean a praise band. It could mean some video and graphics during worship. It could mean more of an online presence. It could mean podcasts for young people who don't want to come to church on Sunday morning but are drawn to the message. Part of transformation is discussing new ways to reach people the people in our neighborhood we are not reaching now.

Conclusion

We are not a megachurch and we never will be. We are a brave little church that is unashamed of being small. We can throw everything we have into the offering plate and trust that God will provide. We trust that through the transformation process God will help us find a way to be sustainable. Our trust will heal us.