

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 11, 2018

Seeing the Poor

Psalm 146; Mark 12:38-44

So this is an awkward passage!
Every three years it shows up in the lectionary.
It is awkward for all sorts of reasons,
not least of which is that
I get to read it to you and preach about it as one who
wears a long robe
and says long prayers
and gets a nice cushioned, high-backed seat in the sanctuary
and gets greeted with respect as you shake my hand at the door.

Jesus says to beware of people like me!
It's tempting when this passage shows up
to leave the robe on the hanger and just preach in a suit.
And I did warn Jackie
that she might want to keep the pastoral prayer a little shorter than usual today.

Awkward for those reasons.
But even more awkward
because this story about people bringing their gifts to the Temple
always appears
right smack in the middle of Stewardship Season!

You might think the story of the Widow's Mite
would be a perfect story for Stewardship Season
as it seems to extol the virtues of humility and sacrificial giving.
For years, that's how this story has been told,
holding up this poor woman as the model of generosity.
Unfortunately, it's not that simple,
and that interpretation rather much ignores the bigger picture
of what is going on systemically in this story.
The reality of this scene is considerably more sinister.

The scribes Jesus warns us about here
are elite members of Judean society,
born into aristocratic families.
These priestly families usually finagled their way into power
by bribing the rulers and officials of whatever nation was in power over Judea
at any given time.
In Jesus' day, these scribes would have been of the Hasmonean dynasty,
the priestly family that had been running Judea for 200 years or so,
the last 100 of which were under Roman rule.

The scribes Jesus warns us about here
have lined the pockets of their fine robes
with the contributions the people are obliged to pay when come to the Temple—
more of a tax than an offering.

The Temple and its elite enjoy an opulence
that makes a mockery of the Temple's original sacred purpose—
the worship of the God of justice and righteousness.

When Jesus says the scribes *devour widows houses*
he is referring to this system of economic exploitation
by which the rich elites of Judean society get all the economic breaks
at the expense of the poor, who end up giving to the Temple
all the resources they might otherwise live on.

Do the scribes notice this poor widow who comes to put in her two meager coins?
Not likely.

But Jesus notices.

Jesus sees the poor widow in her poverty.

He sees what is going on,

how the rich are propped up in their privilege by the Temple economy,
and how the poor have no choice but to participate to their detriment.

Many rich people put in large sums.

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

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.*

*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."*

Jesus loves this woman. But he is not simply complimenting her piety.
He is lamenting her oppression.

So why is this awkward to read during Stewardship Season?

This was an intra-Jewish argument in a very different context.

What does this story even have to do with us?

Well, let's think about how our situation is different, and how it might be the same...

Most of us here today

are those who are being asked to contribute to "God's house" (so to speak)
out of our abundance.

As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago,

if our household income is at least \$34,000 per year

we are among the world's wealthiest 1%,

given that half the world's population lives on less than \$2 per day.

So this could be awkward if Jesus meant to dismiss or discount these
contributions from abundance.

But that's not what Jesus is saying.
Jesus is not saying that if we are blessed with abundance, our generosity means nothing.
But what Jesus may be saying is this:

If we participate in an economic and religious system,
that enables us to remain privileged and comfortable
while allowing us to ignore the plight of the "poor widows" in our community,
or other oppressed members of our community,
then there is something sinful — and even sinister —
about that economic and religious system.

It has been an interesting week in light of this passage.
I'd best leave the elections alone
and let you do your own thinking
about how this passage might relate to the dismal shenanigans we've been enduring
by our politicians — but we all know good and well, it relates.

So let me just move on to Wednesday
and to the luncheon where I had a comfortable seat at the Embassy Suites Hotel
where Thornwell Home for Children
was asking a ballroom full of the abundantly blessed
to contribute to the work of caring for severely disadvantaged children.
They brought a few of those children
and their stories front and center.
Someone paid to feed us a really nice meal
so that we would take the time to look and see these children.
Otherwise, it would be too easy to ignore them.

That evening at Wednesday Night Fellowship
after enjoying another abundant meal
we heard a presentation by the Executive Director of A Child's Haven
about more severely disadvantaged children needing help.
The actual children weren't present but there were videos
so that we would take the time to look and see these children.
Otherwise, it would be too easy to ignore them.

Then on Thursday I enjoyed a superior lunch next door at the Poinsett Club,
wearing the required jacket,
dining with members of this congregation
who happen to be very generous in support of Fourth Presbyterian Church.
But soon after that fine luncheon,
I was sitting on a United Ministries bus, still attired in my Poinsett Club dress code,
being led by Beth Templeton on a poverty tour around Greenville,
as part of her ministry called, "Our Eyes Were Opened."

Such a tour is necessary
because it is quite possible — quite probable — for the affluent to drive around this city,
keeping only to the well manicured streets, seeing only opulence,
while one street over, the poor widows and disadvantaged children
are struggling to survive
just out of sight and out of mind.

The poverty tour is necessary
so that we would take the time to look and see the poor.

Part of what we are doing when we give to Fourth Presbyterian Church
is giving to organizations like United Ministries and Thornwell and others
who help the poor
while they are out of our sight and out of our minds.
And if we give to the Missional Church challenge this year
we'll be able to help even more.

But part of our vision of being a Missional Church
is what we call "living the gospel of reconciliation"
which means that we are called to get outside our privileged insulation
and **to look and to see**
the poverty and struggle of our neighbors.

If we only spend time at the Poinsett Club, or the Greenville Country Club,
or at the Litchfield Beach House, or on certain well manicured streets,
or even right here on the Fourth Presbyterian Church church campus,
**then we are comfortably insulated from seeing
the people Jesus wants his disciples to see.**

This is one of the reasons why we believe
the money we spend on certain salaries
like that of our Associate Pastor of Mission and Discipleship,
and that of our Youth Director,
and the other staff who support their work,
are missional dollars
because these people work hard to get us out of our zones of affluence,
and to get our feet on the ground and our eyes opened
to see the people Jesus want us to see.

Psalm 146 portrays a God who is active in the world,
a God who is out there doing things for people who need God's help.

We worship a God *who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;
who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry...
[who] sets the prisoners free;
The LORD opens the eyes of the blind.
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down...
The LORD watches over the aliens;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.*

The God we worship is not just in here. God is active in the world.
God is more than an idea. God does things.
And God calls us to take part in what God is doing.

Jesus sat down opposite the treasury and watched...

Then he called his disciples...to watch and see...

How will you, and how will I,
get ourselves out of our places of privilege...
so that we, too,
can watch and see...
the poor ones...the oppressed ones...the marginalized ones
Jesus is calling us
to see?