

24th Sunday After Pentecost
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Rev. Jason Glombicki
November 8, 2015

If you look at a Chicago flag you'll see a white background, with two blue horizontal lines, and four red stars. Each star represents something significant in Chicago history. The first star represents Fort Dearborn, the second the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, the third the World's Columbian Exposition, and the fourth the Century of Progress Exposition. Over the years there has been conversation about adding a fifth star, and what is deemed significant enough to add a star has been of great debate. Some wanted a star for the first nuclear reaction below University of Chicago, or for the first Chicago public school, the first Chicago railroad, sending Al Capone to prison, or for reversing the direction of the Chicago River's flow.¹ While no official fifth star has been added, the conversation about what makes something significant is an intriguing question.

Similarly the scripture writers had to determine what was significant enough to be included. In today's reading from Mark we see the story of the scribes who devour the homes of widows along with a story of a widow who gives her last copper coins to the temple as both being significant enough to make the cut. Yet before the story was even written down, it was Jesus who spoke up and called out the situation in the temple as significant.

Since both Jesus and the scripture writers have called the events between the scribes and the widow significant, then one main thing for us to wrestle with today is what does this story communicate to us? We know any event can be viewed in a multiplicity of ways, for example one could think of the interpretation that goes with term "Civil War" or the term the "War of Northern Aggression" – both which describe the same events in the 1860's in radically different ways. Similarly, the story of the widow's coins can be viewed quite differently. In one light we could see this as Jesus' commendation of widow giving her all; in another light Jesus could be speaking condemnation towards the scribes who take the widow's very last coins. Is this story a condemnation or a commendation?

When I've heard this story before in church I've often heard pastors talk about it as a commendation. Preachers use this profound example of the widow to encourage individuals to give their all to the church. After all in Jesus time the poor were not required to give. Rather the poor who did give would do so because they believed in the goodness of in the institution, its leaders, and the need for religion. So, preachers will state that this widow gave it all known that she could rely on the religious institutions to provide for her.

It's no shock in my mind that the most vulnerable, the poor, and the least would give more than the wealthiest of Jesus' time. A 2013 "The Atlantic" article entitled *Why the Rich Don't Give to Charity* noted that the wealthiest Americans donate about 1.3% of their income while the poorest Americans donate 3.2% of their income. What they found is that the largest donations from the wealthiest often went to educational institutions, arts organizations, and to fashionable charities – not one of the 50 largest gifts in 2012 went to a social-service agency or to a charity that principally serves the poor or the dispossessed.

¹ <http://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20150630/south-shore/story-of-rare-five-star-chicago-flag-that-wasnt-supposed-exist>

Why does this happen? Well, one research suggests that it's related to exposure. There is higher empathy with the poor when the rich and the poor intermingle. Or in other words, "exposure to need drives generous behavior."² I think that's a primary example of the significance of today's gospel, namely that we're being exposed to the widow's generous giving which is juxtaposed to the scribes who are dressed to the nines and having the best of the best to eat.

If we want to read the widow's last coins as a commendation then we hold her as the ultimate example of giving. On the other hand, we can view this narrative in its full context. After all, we don't really see Jesus lift up the widow as an example, rather we see him contrast the widow's giving with the rich. Right before that contrast we see Jesus note that the scribes were devouring the houses of the widows, and throughout all of Mark we see the tension between Jesus the scribes. Given that Mark doesn't concern himself all that often with the economically impoverished like Luke does, could this be more of a condemnation of the scribes. Could it be that Jesus is decrying the circumstances that demand the widow to make such an offering?

If we assume that this a condemnation of or, as theologian David Lose put it, a lament for the state of the temple, then what does it say to us today? Should we stand up for those who are most vulnerable? Yes. Should we stand up against the laws or customs that exploit the poor? Most certainly. Should we vote for leaders who advance such policies – policies that mirror God's intention to care always and foremost for "the least of these"? Without a doubt.

Here in this space we've been privileged to have the art installation entitled *Cairn and Cloud*. Cairns are mounds of rocks that often mark a variety of things. One thing a cairn can mark is an event. For example in Scotland a cairn marks the site of The Battle of Rosslyn in 1303,³ and also a cairn in Canada denotes the location of the battle of Fort George during the War of 1812.⁴ In this space we look at our cairn today and think of the important events that occur throughout history and in the scriptures. Today we pause to honor the many events and stories that are important ways we come to know our God. Today we honor the many important events in your life.

In fact the good news from today's Gospel reading is that our God marks the plight of this widow as significant. Our God takes an event that is often swept under the rug, our God looks at the forgotten widow, our God looks at the least of these and has deep compassion and brings to light their story. Our God does not put up with abuse or harassment; our God does not allow individuals to take advantage of a broken system for their gain. Rather, our God sees injustice, recognizes it, and calls it to our attention as significant.⁵

So too in Illinois we are in a dire situation. For months our state has had a budget stalemate. I'm not here to politically suggest the best approach for this budget crisis. Rather, I am seeing in today's reading the need to care for the most vulnerable in the midst of the deadlock. About 10 days ago eleven CFOs from key human service providers noted that this budget impasse has reached a critical level.⁶ Organizations like Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (or LSSI for short) and others are in the difficult place of determining if they can continue support for the most vulnerable. Will they need to shut down home care for seniors, close residential substance abuse

² <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/04/why-the-rich-dont-give/309254/>

³ <http://sinclair.quarterman.org/history/med/battleofrosslyn.html>

⁴ <http://insideniagaralive.ca/?p=894>

⁵ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/pentecost-24-b-surprisingly-good-news/>

⁶ <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/letters/ct-illinois-budget-stalemate-is-hurting-its-nonprofits-20151030-story.html>

centers, or end mental health services? Will they need to lay off employees?⁷ On top of that we know that 911 emergency centers are looking at layoffs and longer wait times for emergencies, museums are closing, and police trainings are being canceled. As a result of this budget standstill dozens were arrested on Monday calling for a budget to be passed immediately to ensure that care for the most vulnerable may continue. Those of us gathered here this day also have the opportunity to communicate that we believe in a God who sees the vulnerable and marks their lives and experiences as significant. In your bulletin today you'll find more information from Lutheran Social Services of Illinois about the budget problem. Today during the offering or during your week I invite you to visit the webpage I've written on the top, it's www.is.gd/LSSIbudget. This will direct you to a site through Lutheran Advocacy of Illinois where you can write your representatives. You've seen the work the LSSI does in the community. We've partnered with them here in this place to support those incarcerated and those who are returning from inpatient mental health treatment. We've seen what these services do to change lives. Use this letter writing campaign as your first step to acknowledge that our God sees all people and that our God marks the experiences of all as significant.

Friends this day be reminded of your baptismal calling when we baptized Layla. Remember the responsibility we're given as God's people, namely to care for others and work for justice and peace. This day we're reminded in the gospel that God sees, acknowledges, and deems significant your life events and the life events of all people. Know that you are loved by our God. You are given a magnificent gift. Go into the world this day and leave God's holy marks with your actions. Amen.

⁷ <http://www.lssi.org/advocacy.php?ref=h1-3>