

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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November 10, 2024

In today's reading, Jesus was in the temple. He had been teaching through parables and answering questions about taxes, the resurrection, the messiah, and the greatest commandment. Before he took a break, Jesus spoke about his primary challengers in Mark's gospel, that was the scribes. The scribes were men who had a deep knowledge of the law and could draft legal documents, like contracts for marriages, divorces, loans, inheritance, and mortgages. These scribes curated a public reputation of being pious with lengthy prayers to convince people that they were trustworthy. Because of this paired with the inability for women to manage their finances, they were entrusted with widows' estates. However, the scribes didn't do this out of the goodness of their hearts. Rather, they would manage the estate for a fee, and in cases where the widow had no adult son or father to oversee her finances, it often led to financial abuse and theft from the estate by the scribes. Their stolen money would be used to buy fancy clothing and sit in the best seats at banquets to further build up their honorable reputation. But, Jesus saw the truth — that the scribes were good at keeping up appearances while destroying the lives of vulnerable widows.

It's important to understand that widows were on the opposite end of the social spectrum from the scribes. After all, if a widow's husband didn't leave her enough financial resources or the scribes stole too much of it, she had nothing. This is why widows were considered some of the most vulnerable individuals. In fact, much of the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Old Testament,

talks about widows and this vulnerable state – and the same was true for orphans and immigrants. And, Jesus named that the scribes were exploiting a broken system for their own gain. These scribes who were tasked with caring for the widows but instead they forced widows into extreme poverty all the while claiming that they were concerned for the widows and were acting righteously.

And then we heard of a widow who gave two copper coins. In mainline churches, we almost always hear this passage during stewardship season as a focus on the faithful and sacrificial giving of the widow. We're told that the widow gave more than the rich people's large sums, because she offered a higher percentage of what she owned. The moral is to be like the poor widow and give beyond your means to the church. And while that is a great way to promote growing a church budget, I can't think of a single place where Jesus encourages the destitute and the poor to give more. Sure, Jesus tells a rich man to sell everything and give it to the poor, and Jesus tells the disciples to leave behind their boats, nets, and houses. But, these people already had wealth. This widow, this vulnerable woman, this person being taken advantage of by the scribes, this child of God was stuck in a corrupt system, and she had nothing.

You see, today's passage is not a tool for stewardship. Rather, it is a critique of a corrupt religious system that failed to do what it was designed to do – that is protect the most vulnerable, namely widows, orphans, and immigrants. Jesus condemned the fake "thoughts and prayers" of the scribes along with the system that groomed an abused widow to give more. This

passage shows us what it looks like when God's people hit rock bottom and forget God's call.

And it's striking to hear this story on the Sunday following an election. An election where so many self-proclaimed Christian nationalists, evangelicals, and Christians took the same bait that Jesus criticized in today's gospel. Individuals were misled by ads, political lies, and misinformation designed to project a curated image. In the end, instead of voting with their faith that clearly and consistently calls to care for the poor, they chose to vote for their own comfort. Where instead of voting for God's love and decency, they voted with anger and fear. And some of the most vulnerable, like the widow, were groomed by a broken system to give up their voice and not vote at all.

And every time we have an election, I remember why I wear this stole. It is a reminder of God's call to proclaim God's vision and not to only talk about ideas and practices that make you and me feel most comfortable. So too, it is a reminder that while the church should not and this congregation will not participate in partisan efforts, the church and this congregation must comment on and engage in the political sphere. That is because, at its core, politics is about how resources and power are utilized in our common life together. And the Scriptures and Jesus have *a lot* to say about how we live together and utilize our power and resources.

Friends, I know that for many this election cycle has been emotionally draining. Some have hope, but many are sad, anxious, disappointed, and speechless. This is a time where we all need to remember the great commandment Jesus named a few verses before today's reading. Jesus said, "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your

soul and with all your strength ... and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mark 12:30-31). For as we enter this Advent season, we are invited to be aware of what it means to love God with all that we are. It is a time to recommit our work to God’s vision to care for the widow, the orphan, the immigrant, the vulnerable, and the marginalized. So too, it’s a time to love our neighbor as ourselves, and to ensure that we aren’t trying to be God. To remember that we need to care for ourselves as much as we care for others, and that we care for others as much as we care for ourselves. To recall God’s deep love for each of us, and the love shared in the gathering of this community.

Today, I invite you to reflect on the Great Commandment and notice where you are. Maybe it’s time to recommit to God’s vision to care for the vulnerable by joining us in feeling the hungry with The Night Ministry, or helping us live more deeply into our commitments to support the queer community, work toward a more anti-racist community, or welcome immigrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers. Or maybe you’re feeling so drained because you’ve been giving your all to care for your neighbor and now, it’s time to rest and rejuvenate so that you can continue to serve others. Or maybe you’re realizing that doom scrolling, binging TV, and consuming all sorts of substances is a self-centered coping technique that is no longer beneficial for you or your neighbor, so it’s time to be with others in this community. No matter where you are today, I pray that you rebalance your life to love God’s vision, to love your neighbor, and to love yourself.

As we journey through this Advent season, this is our focus. I pray that we awaken our awareness toward the systems that exploit the oppressed. Let

us notice how we have become like the scribes caught in our own self-serving acts instead of embracing God's vision to care for the most vulnerable. Then, let us join together in this holy work as we yearn and wait for the day when God's vision is fully realized, and all know God's love. Amen.