

November 10, 2024  
25<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

“Regarding the Desperate”

Mark 12:38-44

When you come into church and look at the readings on the back of your bulletin, seeing the story of the widow’s pennies as the Gospel reading can make one a bit troubled. First, you might worry that the sermon is going to be about stewardship, and folks tend not to like those ones very much. But secondly, and perhaps felt much more deeply, is one’s reaction to the example of this woman who gives all that she has. She shames us, because we know we don’t come anywhere near doing the same.

But both of those reactions come from making this story about us, and I don’t think that is at all the point here. Not that it’s wrong to use this story as a jumping-off point for some self-examination about your practice of Christian stewardship and giving. But I believe Jesus is showing something much, much greater here.

Jesus is in the temple, and we don’t want to take this detail for granted. This temple Herod has built in Jerusalem is a marvel of the ancient world for its grandeur and opulence. It is jaw-dropping. Immediately after our reading is when the disciples remark about the magnificent stones and buildings and Jesus talks about how they will all be destroyed. Prior to the widow episode Jesus speaks of the damning hypocrisy of the scribes who very publicly pretend piety but “devour widow’s houses.” Mark tells us that Jesus sees many rich people putting large sums of money in the offering box.

Yet in the midst of all these impressive things and people, who is it for whom Christ Jesus, the Son of God, has regard? It is this meek, poor, desperate...faithful, widow. This is most certainly good news for you and me!

You see, this is a picture of the church. I mean, the temple actually is the church that day, but this is a picture of Christ’s church here on earth today also.

While I think it’s nice and even helpful to the faith to have a beautiful and sacred-looking place to worship together, Jesus isn’t impressed by ornate and fancy buildings with a big bell tower and pretty prayer garden. While it’s fine and good that folks give big bucks to support the church and its many missions, Jesus isn’t impressed by the amount of your gift. And while making a great show of piety may look good to the world, doing it for show seems to bring condemnation from Jesus.

So what does Jesus regard then? Well, what do we know about this widow? She’s desperate. Two pennies is all she has to her name. She’s a helpless, pitiful. In first-century Israel it is not unlikely that this woman will starve to death rather soon. But what else do we know about her because she puts the two pennies in the offering? She is faithful. She trusts in Yahweh for her deliverance. If her faith was in the world she would have held on to the cash, no matter how little. She doesn’t. It’s all she has to give to God, so she gives it. The point is not that it is all she had so all should give this way. The point is that in gratefulness to God for His mercy she wanted to give in thanks, and two pennies was all she had to give...so she does...even though it is really nothing. This is faithful love of merciful God.

This is good news for us because, how is it we come before God? Well, if we’re doing so truly and rightly we are humble, desperate and with nothing to offer. We are sinners and we are guilty, but God is merciful, so we come before Him. In gratefulness and thanksgiving we respond with love, worship and yes, giving of what we have to His church and charity.

Our piety does not have to be grand enough to qualify for His mercy. Our service to Him is not required to be lofty and noteworthy. And our offerings are not required to be immense or of every last bit of our blessings. No. Christ regards the lowly; the lowly who trust in God their Savior for their deliverance.

It is noteworthy here that Jesus takes no action to end the suffering of this desperate widow. That seems strange to us because other desperate people receive healings and exorcisms from Jesus. Here it seems there is no interaction; no relief of the suffering. Jesus regards her faith and she then continues on her way, possibly to hardship, starvation and death. But Jesus sees her and has regard for her faith. In that, her ultimate deliverance from death is assured.

Likewise when we desperately come before our God in faith and repentance. We pray for relief from many hardships. Maybe God says “yes” and takes them away, maybe not. We can’t understand His motives. We simply trust that His will is done.

But we can be certain that when we humbly and desperately come before Him in faith, trusting in our deliverance in Christ, Jesus regards us! This is the simple promise of Christ Himself: “Whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved.” So that same assurance is in Your baptism into Christ. That assurance is in His body and blood received in faith as you humbly kneel as a desperate beggar at the rail. This is the assurance of His Gospel Word of forgiveness. Jesus has regard for the lowly and desperate sinner and you stand delivered by His grace, mercy and blood of His cross.

So on the one hand I believe this text is clearly a warning to those who may be thinking highly of themselves as Christians. If you take pride in your piety, in being a really good Christian/Lutheran in comparison to others, in giving large sums of support to the church, you should take heed. Jesus noticed the scribes doing the same, and pronounces on them “the greater condemnation.”

But if you look at yourself in the mirror of God’s holy law and you see your guilt, recognize that you are surely a fallen sinner who has nothing good or righteous to bring before the judge of all things and desperately throw yourself at His feet as a humble beggar, seeking His mercy and trusting in His love given to all by His cross, know that He has regard for you. He recognizes You. He forgives you and He receives you.

It does not matter how things look to the world. Jesus did not come for that which looks grand, majestic and impressive to the world. Jesus did not come for those who are pleased with their own righteousness and good works. His church is of the faithful, not the successful. Jesus came to save sinners. Sinners desperately clinging to their Savior because they know their need of His deliverance have His regard, and His salvation.

Amen.