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Sermon for Sunday 10.16.22
First UCC Northfield

Mark 12:38-44 - New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

³⁸As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces³⁹ and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!⁴⁰ They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."⁴¹ He sat down opposite the treasury and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then 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. ⁴⁴For 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."

Sermon

Thank you so much Addie, Annie, Harper, MacKenzie, and Theo for acting out the scripture! And thank you Bob, for interpreting the Scripture and creating the script.

This past Wednesday night, we had a Confirmation kick off for parents and youth at the high school auditorium, with a band and a speaker. You may or may not be aware that for the second year, we are collaborating with other Northfield area churches for a J-Term confirmation project. Though youth are asked to learn in their own churches' confirmation programs during most of the year, this community collaboration gives youth a chance for the month of January, to spend time with friends from other churches, and explore their own interests around faith. It's like a confirmation-version choose your own adventure book—in real life—for January. Each church offers J-term courses and kids from churches register for a course they're interested in hosted by one of the churches based on their interests.

Our speaker was Rolf Jacobson, who is a professor at Luther Seminary. He was asked to speak to confirmation youth Wednesday night about what it is to be Christian in community. And what I loved was that he spoke into this same thing we are learning with today's scripture—Rolf spoke into what captures God's attention.

If you've never met Rolf, you may not know he grew up in Northfield. You may also not know that when he was a student here at Northfield high school, he developed cancer in one leg. It ended up having to be amputated. The next year, he developed cancer in the other leg, which then also had to be amputated.

There's more to his story, and this is *his* story. But in short, he told those of us gathered Wednesday that people used to ask his mom this question: "what it was that got Rolf through such a traumatic time? How was he so resilient?" And she always said, "oh, he just had really great friends." To which Rolf said, "yes, my mom was right, I did have great friends." But then he asked us, "do you know how many times my friends visited me in the hospital? I was in the hospital during my entire junior year. Guess how many times my friends—and they *were* great friends—visited me. Not once." Never. Not once. The thing about pain and suffering, he told us,

is that it naturally repels people. We naturally lean away, not toward, others when things are hard.

Now Rolf told our group that he's told this story many times. Once, he told it to a youth group visiting the seminary where he works. The group visiting the seminary was eating chips from box lunches, and one youth was still eating from a bag of cheetos. Rolf told them about his cancer, the leg amputations, and his friends, and he said to this group visiting the seminary, as they were getting up and were ready to leave the seminary, this: "listen, I just want to tell you one thing. When things are hard and people are going through rough times, just show up. Show up with a bag of cheetos like the one you're eating right there, and say, 'I love you.' That's it. Don't try to fix it, but don't be repelled by it. Our calling is to show up, bring a bag of cheetos and say, I love you." That was his answer for what it is to be Christian in community. To see the despair and horror and sadness of the world. To *notice* it. Not be repelled by how uncomfortable it is. Then to show up for someone who needs it, hand them a trinket that tells them you thought of them, and say, "I love you."

You see that's part of why Jesus lifts up the widow in our scripture today. He notices her when no one else pays any attention to her. She is poor, she is people-less in a society that requires people like widows and orphans to be cared for by the society around them. But that's the whole problem.

Her widowed-ness, her people-lessness has repelled people. No one has paid attention to her. She has been ignored and not cared for, and Jesus can tell, as she gives her last two coins. She shouldn't be in that position and Jesus knows it. And everyone else knows it too, but they're repelled by the poverty, or gravity, or depravity of her situation. So they look away, and she stays in her situation. Even though—according to scripture—everyone was called to help her.

Jesus watches people give in the Scriptures today, people who ensure that others see their good deeds. And then we see one, who has almost nothing, give all she has. If she has so little, why is she giving all she has? Is it hopelessness? I don't think so with the way Jesus lifts her up. I think it's a sense of self-agency and generosity despite having so little. Being so forgotten but acting with dignity anyway. For years, as I told you in our newsletter the Chronicle, this widow has been lifted up for giving everything when she had nothing else to give. The message was that we should do the same; give all we have.

I want to be really careful, though with this scripture, because we live in a culture that regularly demands people give more than they have to give—of themselves, their time, their energy—to stay afloat. And sometimes that's not realistic or possible. Especially in the remaining time of this pandemic.

So please do not hear this story and then expect that Pastor Cindy or I, or your wonderful stewardship team, or the generosity groups at this church will ask you to give when you have nothing left. We believe God wants more for people than asking the already marginalized, worn out, stretched thin, to give even more. We will not be asking you to give your last two coins, and I will not be lifting up this woman, this widow, as a model for giving your all, though her choice to give was beautiful in its own right.

Jesus commends this woman for her genuine generosity, and also her humility. Her contribution is so much more than what the others put in the treasury. But for too long we have confused Jesus' lifting up the woman. He doesn't lift her up as a model where those who

have two coins left to eat or find shelter, and give them to the religious institution. He lifts up her generosity of spirit, her willingness to give, and the way she does it without having to make a show of it.

You see, Jesus is just newly arrived in Jerusalem when this story takes place. So far in Jerusalem, Jesus has spent a fair amount of time there critiquing the unjust systems of power, the corruption in the city. Just before this scripture, he says, “beware of those in long robes. You know, the ones who make a career out of prestige at institutions. They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

Then he sits down across from the treasury. And he watches what we just watched play out. He and watches as the rich compete over who is the richer, more overtly generous, giver. It’s a show of egos, a parade really, or maybe a circus, of the rich one-upping each other to see who can get the most praise and attention.

And Jesus *is* paying attention. But not in the ways these people want. Whether it was the power of the Roman military empire, or the ways some people were corrupting the temple, Jesus wasn’t having it. He has no respect for those who allied themselves with greed; those who have no care for the widow and orphan among them; those whom the scriptures long said we must care for in society.

Let us remember that Jesus, as a good rabbi, is not critiquing a religion. Remember that Jesus was Jewish. In watching what was on display, Jesus saw corruption sneak into the Jewish temple, a place of worship—displacing the widow and the orphan—for wealth and ornate living. We don’t want to mistake what’s happening here with a lens of anti-Semitism, even inadvertently.

Jesus is critiquing how some people chose to inhabit the religious institution which was supposed to be life-giving. Those folks who wear long robes and pray long prayers just for public acclaim, those who give tons of money just so everyone knows how rich and wonderful they are, aren’t caring for the orphan and the widow. Instead they’re stealing their houses out from under them, and in this context, had become greedy, and false, and pompous.

So Jesus is critiquing. He’s not impressed with all that we—still today—think is worth achieving. Instead, he’s concerned with something else. Sitting across from the treasury, Jesus is *noticing*. Jesus is noticing, and in noticing the widow, this person who, if she only has the two smallest coins left to give, must have very little indeed.

Widows and orphans, mentioned most commonly in the scriptures, were expected to be cared for, because didn’t have rights in society. They didn’t own anything, they didn’t have anything in their names, and they didn’t have anyone to care for them but extended family and wider society. If this widow herself was putting in the money she had, scholars believe she must not have had children, family, or friends left to help her. But no one seems to notice that. No one, except Jesus.

For too long we have taken her suffering as an inspirational story, but I think that Jesus might prefer if we were offended by her suffering. Perhaps Jesus also lifts up the widow because she serves as a mirror, as a person whose life shows us what happens when we are repelled by suffering. She is a worthy and beloved person who, by her situation, highlights the cruelty of the powerful and corrupt with her presence; by the fact that she is a widow with only two coins to her name.

And in noticing, Jesus is modeling for those around him to also *notice* what is happening. When Jesus pays attention to this woman, this widow, he is drawing attention to what has always captured God's attention.¹ The widows, orphans, those who have the least of society's wealth. He's being consistent with who scriptures tell us God is. This is the larger context of Jesus noticing. He's drawing attention to the things God cares about: "the widow, the orphan." Make no mistake, "widow and orphan" is code phrase for whomever are the most vulnerable in society. Jesus' paying attention to this widow prods *us* to notice, so that we might ask ourselves in our own context, "Am I the only one seeing this? Why is this okay? Who is caring for this person?"

That's our calling, isn't it? To love God and love our neighbors as ourselves? That's what God's after for us and for the world. But to do so, we have to pay attention, and be willing to notice things that aren't always easy.

When I was researching this sermon, I listened to a podcast and the scholars joked about this scripture saying, "well! Thank goodness this is an ancient text and has nothing to do with us today, huh?" It was funny because they know the tendency we all have to turn the other way. Because it's easier for us. The people in the widow's circle, in her society may have been repelled by her hardship and leaned away. And the thing is, we can't.

To be Christian in community is to say, "I'm going to notice you, see you, and be with you right where you are anyway. I'm going to show up, with a bag of cheetos or a hotdish and say 'I love you,' because while I can't fix every hard thing for you, I'm here with you. And I will be here to stand with you, or care for you right where you are in that hard place. Because it could be any of us."

Has anyone ever done that for you? Noticed you, when so much of the world never saw? Or understood the situation you were going through, or saw why something was so hard because of the system you were in? Or maybe you were the one who saw what no one else could – stepping into another person's pain, just to be with them. So they weren't alone. Maybe that's what this scripture is about –not only being the hands and feet of Christ in the world, but—in seeking to have Christ's awareness, too. The practice of stopping to sit and look at something. This is what has always captured God's attention, in noticing those who too often go unnoticed, but are seen by God all the same. And what else is church if not that place, the people, who strive to see and be seen by one another. A people who confess our unseeing, confront our failures, but also are inspired to risk loving yet again. May we be such a people, such a place. Amen.

¹ Joy J. Moore, Working Preacher Sermon Brainwave Podcast, 2021