

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Twenty Fifth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

1 Kings 17:8-16

Psalm 146

Hebrews 9:24-28

Mark 12:38-44

11/11/2018

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

38As [Jesus] taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 39and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! 40They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

41He 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."

The Gospel of our Lord.

Prayer

Let us pray,

Amen

Law and Gospel

Good morning! I wasn't a happy preacher when I opened up my computer earlier this week and loaded up today's Gospel text. Whenever I read the poor widow text in the Gospel of Mark I just feel guilty, I didn't want to feel guilty! As the week went on, things got worse. It seemed like everywhere I looked the world was tearing itself apart. We had the horrific shooting near Thousand Oaks, California that left 12 people dead. The shooter was a Marine, and while I am not trying to turn him into the victim, the many veterans who worship in this congregation, especially on this Veterans Day weekend, could probably speak to the man's struggle. The shooting hits close to home, with the death of a sheriff sergeant to remind us of this congregation's first responders. Things seemed to get worse as the voting polls closed and we're forced to watch an ever increasing polarization of political ideology that is threatening to split us apart. After that, news of the wildfires in California and the deaths of those trying to escape became another sober reminder of the preciousness of human life. Closer to home we mourn with friends and family who have been making tough medical decisions, decisions none of us would like to face. It's been a tough week, within an already tough month, on top of a hard year.

-So no, I wasn't excited about preaching on today's Gospel text.

I could have chosen the first reading from 1 Kings but the story of one widow just led me to the Gospel text. The second reading from Hebrews seemed a little “ivory tower” for the day, and so back to the Gospel lesson I went.

But since several of us have been taking Dr. Timothy Wengert’s class on the Lutheran Confessions, I figured we could talk about some good ol’ fashioned Lutheran theology: Law and Gospel. It seems that many of us have forgotten our catechetical training in our younger years, or, for people like my wife who is a recovering Catholic, they never got that training in the first place!

Have you ever heard that phrase “Law and Gospel?” To steal a simple definition from *The Lutheran Handbook* the law accuses and demands, while the gospel liberates and frees us.¹ The traditional understanding of law and gospel would suggest that when we pick up a piece of scripture, it can do one of two things: it either functions as law, and thus convicts us, or it presents itself as gospel, and liberates and frees us from guilt. The flood that God announces to Noah is the Law, humanity is wicked and unsalvageable, but the promise of the rainbow is Gospel, it gives us hope.

When we first read the text in front of us today it immediately crushes us under what some pastors would call the “hammer of the law.” Or, at least it does to me. I’m not nearly as trusting as the widow, and sometimes I feel a lot like those scribes Jesus warns the disciples about. But let’s unpack this story.

¹Skrade, Kristofer, and James Satter. *The Lutheran Handbook*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005. pp. 86-87.

The text presents itself to us in two different stories, but it's abundantly clear that they are intended to work together as one story, a sort of this and that. We begin with a warning about the scribes. Now, it's important to remember that Jesus isn't attacking EVERY scribe, or EVERY Pharisee. Some of those Pharisees would have become followers of Jesus, and while some scribes were indeed corrupt, it's a danger to lump an entire group of people into one negative stereotype.

What we do know is that some of the scribes did abuse their power. The society structure in Israel was built upon the laws outlined in the Hebrew Scriptures. There wasn't the distinction between church and state that we understand now. So the scribes had an important role, they functioned as both lawyer and theologian. But some of them were a little braggy. They wore long and elaborate robes, attracting attention with their fancy dress in crowded public places. They take the best seats in the synagogues, seats that would have probably faced the congregation, thus, putting them on display for everyone to see. According to one scholar it wasn't uncommon for a scribe to appoint themselves as trustee over the estate of a widow, thus taking whatever income the widow could have used to help sustain herself.²

Things were different for a widow in the first century. One commentator writes that "*A woman whose husband had died had no inheritance rights in ancient Israel... Most widows had to rely on their children or on charity... The OT prophets frequently criticize the exploitation of widows.*"³ So, with the stage set Jesus moves to observe the community as they make their gifts.

²Donahue, John R., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Mark*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2002. p. 363.

³Donahue, John R., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Mark*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2002. p. 363.

A poor widow enters, and gives a meager tiny amount of money. (Can you imagine letting the whole congregation know what you gave?!) We see different names or amounts used depending on the translation but *“the point is, simply, that the coin was the smallest unit of money in that time and place and that the woman, having only two, gave all she had.”*⁴

Ouch! Do you feel crushed under that hammer of the law?! The meaning of the text seems obvious right? Don't be like the scribes who only give a set amount and instead be more like the widow, giving everything and trusting in God...

But what if that's not what the text is actually saying?

What if Jesus is saying something completely different?

In the very next part of the text Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple. In about a dozen years the Jews will rebel against Rome forcing the Roman army to do exactly what it does best: destroy. Some estimates put the size of the temple at this point to roughly the equivalent of 3-4 football fields, and the Romans LEVELED it. The place sat on top of a hill, That hill is gone, and the only thing left is the wailing wall.

So some scholars have taken a different approach to this lesson. *“Some interpreters find the meaning of the story in the contrast between the widow and the scribe of the previous story. They suggest that Jesus is attacking both the scribes and the religious system that taught this woman to offer her tiny coins, as though God would demand such sacrifices of the poor of the*

⁴Williamson, Lamar. *Mark*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 234.

world,”⁵ one commentator writes. Another scholar continues, “*when interpreted as cause for lament the widow’s action would illustrate the perils of institutional religion whereby the Temple establishment manipulated this generous woman into parting with what little she possessed.*”⁶

Wow... Now that’s a different take on the text. It still works as Law, in fact, I would say it even raises the stakes. I sometimes think it would be easier to give all my money away than to actually work against the many systems of thought and institutions in the world that continue to abuse people like the poor widow. But here’s the interesting thing, I think this reading in the text is both Law AND Gospel.

Listen to the good news! You and I are both sinners. If left to our own devices, we’ll usually mess things up. Our attempts at earning our salvation have failed. And that’s the best part! Because we’ve made it abundantly clear that if it were up to us, it wouldn’t work! But it’s not up to us! There isn’t a single thing that WE can do to fix the problem. Fortunately, our God is more powerful. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ we have defeated death and God grace has been bestowed upon US! In the words of Dr. Wengert, WE don’t have to do anything! God has already done it! In fact, God hasn’t STOPPED working in our lives. That’s what I love about this congregation! As we sit together in this round room we look across at one another and refuse to let our differences divide us! You’re all members of different political parties and yet somehow we are able to get along! Yes, the world can sometimes seem like a

⁵Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 517.

⁶Donahue, John R., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Mark*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2002. p. 365.

horrible place, but when we stop and listen, we can hear the wonderful news of a God who is continually working to restore us to wholeness... And that sounds like good news to me. Amen.