

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Twenty Fifth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Final Sermon At St. Paul's

First Kings 17:8-16

Psalm 146

Hebrews 9:24-28

Mark 12:38-44

11/10/2024

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

38 As [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, 39 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. 42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 43 Then 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. 44 For 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

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Goodbye

Good morning! Boy. In my time here I've had trouble writing sermons. Maybe the well was just dry, or the text was a tough one. Maybe I was worn out, or just struggling to connect with a story. But this one I think takes the cake. So, let's hit pause on everything else that's happening and instead focus on the Gospel, because that's probably the right thing to do anyway.

We find ourselves back in the Gospel of Mark today. We spent the two weeks of Reformation Day and All Saints Day in the Gospel of John, but we come back to the Gospel we have spent most of this year in, Mark. You might notice that we're near the end of the story. Just a short time ago Jesus has made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem and he is spending his last days in the Holy City. We are nearing the end, nearing the cross. Jesus and the powers-that-be are at odds, and it's only going to end when someone is dead.

We begin our story with some teaching. He teaches in a different way than what we expect. Where teachers stand and students sit, in the first century it was the other way. The teacher relaxed and spoke while the crowds stood around and listened. But it's what Jesus was teaching that really grabbed the attention of everyone around him. *“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 39 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.”*

If Jesus wasn't popular with the powerful of the city, this certainly didn't help. The NRSVue translates verse 38 by using the word “scribes” but

the New English Translation (NET) does a better job. They're called "experts in the law" in that translation. Because that's really what they were. Because the laws that governed Jewish life were biblical, this group of people would have been a sort of expert group in books like Leviticus and other legal documents, so a sort of historian and lawyer all wrapped up in one.

But they abused their power, and Jesus calls them out in our text today. Because just like our current legal system, it was a complicated thing, and it sometimes hinged on small technicalities. This was abused, and people like these scribes would use their legal power to seize the homes and assets of people like widows.

As our First Reading showed, widows were often the ones with the very least to offer. But God routinely called for special protection of the widow, the orphan, the alien, the poor, and the prisoner. God does this a good bit in Hebrew Scriptures, because, as it turns out, we are pretty bad at listening and so we need to be reminded. Widows basically became the burden of the family after the death of their husband. They had no rights to property or anything else that their husband had owned. They were completely and utterly dependent on the community... and the community had a habit of forgetting them.

The scribes, or "experts in the law," would use loopholes to swindle innocent widows out of any protection they had. It wasn't an exaggeration when Jesus said that "*They devour widows' houses*" in the text.

But they also give long, fancy, and exaggerated prayers! Norm Otto, a wise man, will often tell me that "brevity is next to godliness." And I think I have to agree. If you can say it in three words instead of five, why waste the time? We've all been in a worship service where the written prayers seem to

be extra fancy, just for the sake of being extra fancy. Jesus wasn't fooled two thousand years ago and we aren't fooled today! These scribes say one thing, but turn around and betray themselves with their actions.

But the story doesn't stop there. There were no streaming services, no internet or smart phones to pass the time, and so people would gather in public. Jesus observes the actions of those giving gifts to the Temple. The rich would make a big to-do when they gave, drawing attention to the large amounts they donated. But the poor widow is the one that gets Jesus' attention. *"Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For 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."*

Today we will put aside the problems of a system where a poor widow feels compelled to give everything she has, but instead we will focus on her faith.

Because she reminds me a lot of St. Paul's. I have always felt that St. Paul's had a little bit of "little-man-syndrome." It's no secret that we are the smaller of the two Lutheran congregations in Hampton, and we were never as large as our mother church, Trinity in Newport News. And so sometimes I have sensed a desire to "prove" itself to the rest of the Synod.

But it's not necessary. St. Paul's gifts lie in its ability to love and in the faith it inspires. Its generosity shines in defiance of a world that says "we just don't have enough."

How do I know? Because you have loved and supported me from the minute I landed in Norfolk to visit this congregation in April of 2016. You have surrounded Megan, me, and even Ned with love and support at every step.

It sure hasn't been easy, we've been through births, deaths, pandemics, and everything in between. But my love for you will never diminish. One of the things I realized a few months ago was that just because I love a place, it doesn't give me the right to stay. It was time for someone new to come to St. Paul's, and it was time for me to go. But that doesn't mean it's easy, and it sure as heck doesn't change how I will feel about you.

My first sermon was on the Gospel of John where Jesus calls on the disciples to love one another. I preached that I hoped I could be a pastor who helped you all do just that. But it turns out I failed. Because you all showed me love in ways I could never imagine. Thank you St. Paul's, and God bless. Amen.