



Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush
Text: Mark 12:38-44

November 10, 2024

Moving Forward Faithfully

Some Sundays are harder than others to put together a sermon. Today I need to say a bit about the fact that we've just endured a difficult election and I need to highlight our church's budget plans for the coming year. Knowing that about today's sermon means that many of you will probably feel like the sleepy old man who attended church long ago in colonial America. Back then, the church beadle had a long hickory rod with a knob on the end designed for tapping anyone who fell asleep in church. As the annual Stewardship sermon unfolded, the old man's eyelids started to droop. The beadle sternly tapped him on the shoulder, but soon the old man's head was nodding forward. The preacher frowned and the beadle struck him again, but still he fell asleep. The preacher shook his head so the beadle took the hickory stick and smacked the man on top of his bald head, causing the old-timer to fall out of the pew into the aisle. The man then slowly opened one eye, squinted up at the beadle and said, "Hit me again, I can still hear him."

To add to today's difficulties, our gospel lesson is a less than exciting study from Mark's gospel - a passage mostly about the difference between the temple gifts from wealthy scribes and a poor woman's donation of a few copper coins. It's a straightforward morality tale: Don't be like the pompous rich who make a show of their large contributions; be like the humble widow who gave to God despite her poverty. But there are two problems with this story. First, it has been preached on for years on Stewardship Sunday, so it likely has few new insights to offer today. Second, its fundamental message runs contrary to the goal of stewardship campaigns - namely, churches need generous donations and can't survive on spare change and tiny offerings from church members. Now I'm not going to kick this passage to the curb. It has something important to tell us today, although surprisingly it doesn't have much to do with copper coins and the difference between two persons' gifts that day in the Jerusalem temple. But before we talk about that, let's first deal with what happened on Tuesday.

Some of you may be pleased with the results of this week's national election. If you are, I'm curious as to your reasons for feeling that way and would be happy to talk about it. Personally I'm deeply disappointed by the election results. If my saying that so forthrightly surprises you, then you haven't read the minister's handbook, aka the bible, lately. My role as a preacher is not to tread a line of cautious impartiality, offering trite platitudes and noncommittal assurances in times of national division. The bible is not impartial. It is always biased toward the poor, the disadvantaged, the maligned, and maltreated. It teaches unequivocally that character matters, that liars dishonor God, and that power is to be wielded to protect the powerless and not to appease the narcissist.

Having said that, it is also true that there are nuances in almost every political battle but the way the American media talks about politics is intentionally devoid of nuance. We are shown maps of the country in which counties are colored red or blue, even though no county is entirely one party or another. Every voting precinct has diversity in it. Every red state has both Republican and Democrat voters and vice versa for the blue states. We are a mixed bag of opinions and ideas; always have been and always will be. Which is why I take heart from the little town of Dixville Notch in northern New Hampshire. Every election the residents of Dixville Notch vote at the stroke of midnight, all six of them, so that their results are the first ones reported on election day. This year Dixville Notch voted 3-3 in the presidential election. That gives me hope for America. If those six people can be evenly split in their politics and still run an unincorporated little town in New Hampshire, then why are we so worried here in Milwaukee?

Over the past few days, the predominant question I've been asked is some version of "What should we do now?" Well, despite what the TV commentators, Op-Ed writers, and social media pundits tell you, there's only so much any of us can do in the coming months. You and I can't affect national policy on Trump tariffs, on state department negotiations about the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, on congressional actions about possible tax cuts that will balloon the national deficit, or short-sighted executive orders cancelling regulations that will make the climate crisis worse. I'm sorry but those legislative areas are largely out of our hands.

But there are at least three areas where we can have an impact. First, if an ill-advised and illegal mass deportation effort truly takes shape, we need to learn how to protect and support the migrants in our midst, shielding them from xenophobic policies so that the Dreamers and Asylum-seekers have the same chance at freedom our immigrant parents were granted. Second, no woman should be ever denied personal health care; and if states try to slam the doors on legitimate medical care for pregnant women, we have to make sure our Wisconsin doors remain open and welcoming for all. Third, we have come too far in our awareness of LGBTQ inclusivity to ever go back. The demonizing of transgender youth and families cannot be tolerated. In all of these cases, the way forward is to learn the stories of migrants, of women seeking pregnancy care, and LGBTQ individuals feeling at risk, and then act to keep them safe despite a changing political culture. We will say their names. We will tell their stories. We will open our doors and our mission budgets and refuse to backslide because of prejudicial and politically motivated culture wars. That is our calling in these changing times.

Which surprisingly actually brings me back to our Stewardship Sunday passage from Mark's gospel. Jesus didn't do what he did in the temple long ago just to offer a simplistic object lesson about rich people vs. poor people. This passage wouldn't still be read 2000 years later if all it was trying to say was "Don't be a wealthy jerk making a big show of your money; be a humble person who does the best you can with however little

you happen to have.” There’s something else fundamentally important that Jesus is communicating in this passage.

In the Jerusalem temple, there were a couple walled courtyards in which people gathered. In one of them, there were thirteen trumpet-shaped, brass funnels that emptied into wooden boxes. Into these receptacles, people would pour their offerings to support the temple itself. There were no paper bills in those days, so the wealthy would literally pour in bags of coins, which understandably made quite a lot of noise echoing in these courtyards. That was intentional. How better to show your importance and prosperity than by how loudly and how long it took to pour your offering into the treasury boxes?

Now consider the details in verse 41, where it says that Jesus sat down opposite these treasury boxes, and how he and his disciples were there “watching the crowd putting money into the treasury.” They were not doing this because they were bored and just liked people-watching. Jesus knew there’s an important difference between “looking” and “seeing.” He’d already made this point earlier when he told them to not just look at the scribes who walk around in long robes, taking the best seats in public places, and saying long prayers. He wanted the disciples to see them as deserving condemnation for their hypocrisy and their greed that took advantage of the widows and poor. Jesus did this all the time. People would look at the side of the road and glance briefly at a blind beggar, but Jesus would see him as a child of God needing to be healed. People would jostle around Jesus trying to get his attention, but Jesus would see the one woman who’d touched the hem of his robe and desperately needed to be healed from a persistent flow of blood.

On this day, Jesus wanted the disciples to look with eyes of faith as the crowd put their gifts into the brass treasury boxes. He wanted them to look at the rich people pouring in their coins, as well as the poor widow who dropped her copper cents into the same receptacle. But then he wanted them to truly see her. To recognize that what she did came from her heart, not from her abundance. To see her as acting from a love of God and not from a desire to win the love of the world. Jesus wants us to look with the eyes of faith and see those whom the world barely notices – the poor, the migrant, the scared pregnant girl, the gay, lesbian, or transgender youth, those in need in our churches right now.

But Jesus didn’t just need the disciples to train their eyes to see faithfully. He also needed them to train their ears. They were seated across the courtyard from these brass receptacles. It wasn’t hard to hear the money being poured in by the rich. But to hear two small coins placed in that treasury box – for that, you had to be extra attentive. For that you had to shut out the noise of the world and allow something else to be heard. To hear the sound of two pennies being dropped in a box. That’s comparable to listening to a whispered story shared by someone afraid of being deported, or someone worried about being treated fairly, or someone beaten down by a world that overlooks them and is quick to deny them their rights.

Church budgets are lists of numbers shaped by a single goal of serving the risen Christ out of a trust that he is still with us today. They reflect our willingness to create a space, a church, to come together – friends and strangers alike. They reflect a desire to see with eyes of faith – to value the gifts each person brings, to see them regardless of politics or past sins as a child of God. And budgets reflect a focus not just on our eyesight, but also our hearing – a commitment to listen carefully to the sounds of the world with its copper coins, muffled tears, and the quiet prayers from someone feeling all alone.

Because of all this, our stewardship theme for this year is to see faithfully, to hear faithfully, to act and advocate in a fraught political season faithfully, but most of all, by God's grace after the example of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are to move forward faithfully. Come, join in this good work. Amen