

Not Just a Son, Not Only a Coin

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Mark 12:38-44

November 10, 2024

Let us pray: God you are ever faithful; may our lives of discipleship reflect the unshakable covenant you have made to your people. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, oh our Rock and our Redeemer.

Jesus words today, came as he sat outside the temple treasury. He watched people giving their offerings. He saw the scribes, those political figures of decadence who held socially transformative positions, enjoying grand meals in fine clothes. He saw wealthy people give vast sums. Then comes the widow. Jesus gathers his disciples together saying:

“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.”

Often Jesus words are co-opted to form a critique of ostentatious religious practices. The scribes become the “poster child” for sin. The Pharisees become a target for religious-political corruption. The widow, then, is placed upon a poverty-stricken pedestal of absolute faithfulness; valorized for her complete sacrifice which mimics the complete sacrifice of God in the giving of his only Son.

This is a dangerous interpretation. It places the crushing burden of faithful sacrifice upon the backs of those already broken by social injustice. It also ascribes the existence of sacrifice to a particular person, a person outside ourselves. Safe and at a distance, we do not have to engage in personal self-reflection, or risk naming of our own hypocrisy.

Jesus words to his disciples and us here today, are beware. Beware the community whose powerful and wealthy members devour the desperate sacrifices of the poor and powerless. Beware those without love for the widow, who do not see her sacrifice and her suffering. Jesus' voice was a singular voice on the steps of a mighty temple. His words were like those in Isaiah "crying out in the wilderness". Jesus was Prophetically speaking against a system which bled some dry, so others would have even more.

Jesus' cry comes upon the heels of being quizzed by scribe who asked, "Which commandment is the first of all?"

He answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

It is love of God and love of neighbor that come first, from this devotion flows our passionate response. It is love of God and love of neighbor which defines the shape of discipleship and Christian duty.

Just as in the struggles of Christ's day, we continue the struggle to live within the governance of this land, while simultaneously entrusting our greatest hope to the divine Kingdom of God. God's prophets and history, itself remind us that if we take Jesus's words of hope and life seriously, we are often outsiders to empire and our wider cultural context.

Our church has a very long, and hope-filled history of engaging in the struggle of authentic discipleship.

Our Pastor, Rev. Dr. Harry Peabody was an outspoken patriot during World War 1. He preached a sermon entitled "America on Trial: A Protest Against Perverted Nationalism" advancing international relationships and proposing a "League of Nations" in reaction to political figures espousing American Isolation. Then came the great depression and its undeniable hardship felt across this land.

November 13, 1931

To the Elders and Trustees, My Dear Friends,

At your joint meeting next Monday, you face a very critical time in the life of this church. Two plain facts stare you in the face: smaller audiences at the church service than any time in memory of most of us, and a steadily declining income. The business depression and the reduced income of the members account for the latter fact. But that many of our members have lost interest and rarely attend worship is a very serious fact. It is some comfort to know other churches are having similar experiences.

My own desire is to see this church prosper spiritually and financially. My own welfare is always second to that of the church. At this moment I feel like resigning that I might further the welfare of this church, but I hesitate to depend entirely upon my own judgement and act thereon. All I ask of you is to be honest with me.

Two other matters you should consider. In view of dwindling income... there must be a scaling down, a cut to staff salaries and other expenses. Cut my salary. Give others a 10% cut. But I have one plea as you use the knife- don't cut the missionary budget any more than you cut the rest of the budget. It would be a mistake both from the standpoint of spiritual prosperity and a financial one. While there are some of our members who have never believed in our missionary gifts, yet by far the majority of our people and the best supporters, we have do believe in our duty as a church to render Christan service outside our own parish, a deep conviction that we should approach as nearly as possible the New Testament goal of loving our neighbor as ourselves. So strong is that conviction that you will find that so drastic a cut will not help to balance your budget one iota for members will radically cut their pledges and send their money direct to the missionary board. You will seriously offend the convictions and chill the hearts of our very best members.

With these matters laid upon your hearts at the meeting Monday night I shall absent myself that your discussion may be free and unembarrassed. I pray God to guide you and to bless our parish during the years to come.

Affectionally your pastor, Harry E Peabody.

Peabody did not exaggerate the financial crises; it was 1939 before the church saw its budget return to pre-depression levels. And by the way, his offer to resign was rejected and he continued to serve as pastor until his successful resignation on January 6, 1935, at the age of 70.

Our church has long supported sending people into this world, to love our neighbor as ourselves, and to speak prophetically. This included James Zwerg, a young man who grew up our church. While a junior at Beloit College he became an exchange student at Fisk University in Nashville Tennessee, an all-black university. He joined a group of 21 students - 18 blacks and 3 whites - who went to Alabama by bus to test integration. They would become known as "The Freedom Riders." The group was arrested and jailed in Birmingham, then went on to Montgomery where they were beaten and mauled by crowds of more than 1,000 people. Jim was hospitalized. During his recovery, our secretary to the Deacons Board wrote him a letter:

Dear Jim:

We have read and heard your accounts of what you have been through and of what you are attempting to accomplish in Montgomery. The results of your endeavors have left us dismayed and angry to know that a person such as yourself should be denied legal rights and medical aid.

At the same time, as Deacons of First Congregational Church, from which body you received encouragement in making your decision to serve Christ-

we feel compelled to write you and tell you how proud we are of your Christian courage and your example to our church and to the whole world.

By coincidence your difficult decision to stand for your ideals came on the weekend when a class of 27 was confirmed in an impressive ceremony last Sunday. The point that at some time we must make a decision on how to use our lives as Christians was never brought home with more force to these young people, some of whom know you, as we do.

You have chosen a difficult way, and we respect and admire you for it. We wish you a speedy recovery from your injuries and ask God's protection for you.

James Zwerg would recover. He would receive his Bachelor of Divinity from Garrett Theological Seminary in Illinois. And he was ordained in June 1965 in our Old Red Brick building on Oneida street in what read as a very celebratory weekend for all involved.

Perhaps you feel too old to be useful to God anymore; minister anyway trusting the Spirit to give you strength. Perhaps you feel too young to test the system and make a difference; ride the bus anyway trusting that the Living Christ to place you right where you need to be. Perhaps we find ourselves singular voices on the outside of temple so grand, so permanent so powerful we feel our words are nothing more like the rustling leaves in the wind about to be trampled underfoot. Take heart and speak faithfully- anyway.

As we do in all elections; we absent ourselves. The collective voices of this country speak in private. The outcome gives us new information about who we are as a nation, and how we as people of faith are called to respond. Now we can name the absolute importance, shape, and necessity of our efforts as a church of Jesus Christ- for today. And I know faithful people everywhere will continue to rise to the occasion.

I am proud of this church, I could write you endless letters sharing how proud I am of all of you, for the ways you have responded to serve Jesus Christ and be an example of forward-thinking, inclusive, and welcoming Disciples of Jesus Christ.

And because we are disciples, living in a historic time, we belong to the long unbroken line of those who live into God's covenant of hope and life. No election changes who we are. And no history yet to come will alter God's faithfulness to God's people. For it is the God of Israel who has brought us here today – to sing joyfully, speak prophetically, and cast our lives upon God's endless and eternal sea of Grace.

Now that I think about it; now that I reflect, now that I sit at the temple's edge, being in the margins, I enjoy listening to crazy people like this Jesus the Christ, The King of the Jews, who loved despite knowing he would be crucified. Jesus often quotes the prophet Isaiah, who also held an unfailing hope in God in one hand and utter despair and warnings of impending destruction in the other. This duality makes sense historically, and it also warms my glad heart, a heart which longs to show love for the widow, the

orphan, the immigrant, all of diverse people and all of creation- which empire and culture has cast aside, and yet for whom Christ advocates.

Yes, it's a fine and faithful way of life, which we have chosen, sitting at the temple's edge and gathered with my fellow disciples. Will you choose it again with me?

Amen