

November 8, 2015
24th Sunday after Pentecost (Yr. B)
Mark 12:38-44
The Rev. Carenda Baker

Let us pray: Gracious Holy Spirit, come to us, and among us; come as the wind and cleanse us; come as the fire, and burn; come as the dew and refresh; convict, convert, and consecrate our hearts and lives for our good, and for your greater glory. This we ask for the sake of your love and in Christ's name. Amen.

One of our parishioners shared with me that recently he visited a church and the preacher began his sermon by asking the congregation, ***“Who here today is wearing a mask?”*** (And the preacher wasn't referring to Halloween!). The preacher went on to talk about hypocrisy, which is about wearing a mask, when we say one thing and do another.

Hypocrisy is a dirty word in the Old and New Testaments, and it is front and center in today's gospel reading. This is the last report Mark's gospel gives us of Jesus sharing an important teaching with the disciples. His talk will soon turn to signs of the end times, and then will come his passion, death, and resurrection. The setting for this teaching in today's gospel is the temple, that holy and respected religious place of Jewish worship. Here in the temple, Jesus instructs the disciples about good and bad models of leadership. Jesus' words are sharp and he uses an imperative verb: ***“Beware of”***, or “watch out for”, or “be on guard against” the behavior you see here from the scribes, says Jesus. Beware of those who want to be doted on with special seats and places of honor, to be recognized very publicly because of their high and revered status. Jesus points out the discrepancy he sees right in front of them, between the scribes at work and the anonymous widow at worship. The difference between religious posturing and costly discipleship. As Anglican priest Herbert O'Driscoll says, “What our Lord wishes to see in our spirituality is genuineness.”

And this is what the gospels show us about Jesus, isn't it – his genuineness? If we could ask Jesus what his message is, he could truthfully say, ***“My message is my life”***. What you see is what you get – genuineness – the thoughts of my heart and my words & deeds are in harmony, my inside will and my outside behavior, match. This is in stark contrast to the word of judgment delivered by the prophet Isaiah, who says God's criticism is of the people who “draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me.” (*Isaiah 29:13*). We know this about ourselves at some level: sadly, we are not always who we say we are. Our inside and our outside don't always match.

So, Jesus is listening and watching the worshipers in the temple, sitting across from the treasury, where people put in their money offerings. “Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.” It is a prime teaching moment and Jesus grabs it. “Come here”, he says to the disciples. Do you see this? “The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the

collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they will never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford – she gave her all.” (from *“The Message”* by Eugene Peterson).

The late preaching professor Fred Craddock comments about this scene: “The measure by which Jesus weighs the widow’s gift is not sentiment, but the comparison of one’s gift to what one has remaining for oneself. Jesus does not speak against large gifts or romanticize small ones; he simply notes that some, after giving large amounts, still have abundance while the widow, after her gift has nothing. Nothing, that is, except complete trust in God.” (quoted in *“Preaching the New Common Lectionary”*).

I don’t know how this story strikes you, but this lesson has made me squirm this week – a lot. The crux of this passage seems really to be about how much we hold back, and to what extent we acknowledge that EVERYTHING we have belongs to God – body, heart, mind, spirit, relationships and all our “stuff” – homes, cars, education, jobs, health, gifts and talents, time and money, this building, this Trinity faith community. It can take a long time for us to begin to understand that everything we have is on loan from God, including our very lives. It is the Holy Spirit’s challenging work to reveal this truth to us.

We are now engaged in a month of Sundays where we are reflecting intentionally on stewardship – not simply money & finances, but the stewardship of our total lives as they belong to God. It is a time to focus on how our individual and communal practices of stewardship affect our spiritual vitality and health. A steward is one entrusted to look after and take care of God’s stuff, which is to say, EVERYTHING that touches our lives, including the natural created world.

If you haven’t thought about it lately, take a moment and reflect on the nature of the God whom you serve. Is the God you serve a good and gracious God, or a stingy, stern and exacting God? Do you serve a God who gives half-heartedly, holding back the best gifts for God’s self? Or do you know and serve a God who withholds nothing, giving the very best by giving Himself to us, as we proclaim and celebrate every time we share the Eucharist together?

“All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee”, we say and sing as the morning offerings are brought forward to the Table. Everything we have, our very life breath, belongs to God. So as stewards, holders of the gifts, it is our task to decide how we will invest all the gifts of God we have been given. Stingily? Freely? Fearfully? Trustingly? Grudgingly? Gratefully?

Consider the presence or absence of the attitude of gratitude in your life. How much does our thankfulness show? Are we so thankful for all that God has given and continues to give, that our response is to give back to God as our first priority? Or does what we want come first and God has to settle for what’s left? Is God at the center of my life or is ego – EGO – as someone has described it - the disposition that “Edges God Out”?

Stewardship is not about shoulds, oughts, and musts. It is not about guilt. It is not about rules, duty, or obligation. It is about the disposition of our hearts and the desire we have to deepen our relationship with God, to know and fall more fully into the loving heart and embrace of God. Stewardship reflects the desire to be shaped into the kind of giver God is, and Jesus was – holding nothing back for the sake of the One we love.

So, let me share with you just a bit of my own stewardship journey, specifically about my relationship with money. Some of you met my parents who were here last week. My parents are simple people and they love the Lord. They were firmly dedicated to making God the center of our family's life when I was growing up. They taught my brother and me the importance of tithing, giving 10% back to God, which they did when I was growing up, and which they still do.

For much of my life as an adult, I tithed to the church. And then I came to a point where that practice shifted, because of changing spiritual and emotional realities in my life. I went through a fairly long period of being angry with the institutional church, angry about unjust denominational policies, inhospitable and exclusionary practices, finding myself caught in the wheels of the systemic sin of the church as a human, flawed institution. I was hurt deeply. And I stopped tithing.

Unpredictable as our God is, God wooed me back to the church over time, and has brought me healing, new life, and a richer, deeper perspective about this God whom I love and serve, and what it means to live and serve God in community. This has all been part of my journey of embracing the Anglican tradition and being called to live out the Christian faith and life as an Episcopal priest. As a new priest serving in the diocese, I have been assigned by the bishop a mentoring priest to shepherd me for two years. My mentoring priest is Barbara Hutchinson, rector of St. Andrew's Church in Shippensburg. About a month ago Barbara and I were meeting and the topic of stewardship came up. Barbara has a passion for stewardship, and was actually on staff for five years as stewardship and church development director at St. James in Lancaster before she went to seminary and was ordained as a priest. She brought up the subject of tithing and said, "You really can't ask the people of Trinity to do something you are not willing to do yourself." It set my teeth on edge. I felt myself stiffen and become silent. She had hit a really tender, sore spot for me, a place of emotional and spiritual resistance.

Quite honestly, my heart has not been completely open or ready to become that vulnerable again with God and God's church, to let God have all of me, all of my time, talent and treasure, including my relationship with money. But God is gracious, and God is patient, and God is a tender healing teacher, and God is not finished with me yet. So I have come to see there are further steps to spiritual health and vitality that I am being called and invited to embrace.

The Letter of Agreement I signed with the vestry in August stipulates that the annual cash stipend I will receive as your rector is \$30,703 or \$2,558 per month. My pledge to Trinity for the coming year will be 8% of my cash stipend, \$205 per month. It is my hope that in a year's time I will increase that to a 10% tithe. God alone knows where it

may go after that. I fully expect that I am about to begin to experience a level of joy that I have not known for quite a long time.

I believe that our giving is an indicator of the vibrancy of our relationship with God. Giving is a spiritual practice and requires intentional thought and discipline. It is an act of faith. Proportionate giving is a sign of trust in God's goodness and love. Active, regular giving shows that I want and need God to be at the very center of my life. I don't want to live in that spot where EGO is in charge – "Edging God Out". I want to live in that wide and wholesome space of inviting God into my life more and more.

In the gospel story, there in the temple the widow's gift foreshadows the gift Jesus was about to make of his very own life. The widow becomes a likeness of Jesus, the One, who "though he was rich, yet for our sake became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich" (*II Corinthians 8:9*).

We **are** rich with the life and love and mercy of God. My hope for each of us is that like our Lord, the message others will see and hear is the depth of that Divine love in our very living. Come, Holy Spirit, and make it so. **AMEN.**