

Sunday, November 10, 2024
25th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 27B)

Mark 12.38-44

St. Gregory's, Long Beach

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1117284743394725>

(Sermon begins at about 23:50)

"Response to the 2024 Election"

As I prepare to preach today's sermon, I have a profound sense of déjà vu. Eight years ago—November 13, 2016—I stood in this spot, at this ambo, and prepared to preach what would only be my second sermon as Rector of St. Gregory's. A sermon in which I felt the need to address what had happened the previous Tuesday: the day Donald Trump was elected to his first term as President of the United States. To speak to a group of people I had just met less than two weeks before and to try to provide some guidance as to how we as a parish, with differing political perspectives, were to move forward following what was one of the most divisive elections in our nation's history.

Little did I know that, eight years later, I would be called upon to preach a comparable sermon. And yet, here we are. In many ways, what was true then continues to be true now. The president-elect is the same, although his opponents were different. Some of the issues were the same, although some were different. Some of the campaign tactics were the same, although some were different. Perhaps the biggest difference is that we now have a lived experience of what his first presidency was like. And in many ways, we have a different social and political landscape than we did eight years ago. Partially due to the pandemic, although largely due to the ramifications of actions taken during that first term in office. So, while things are very similar in so many ways, there are also profound differences. Particularly in terms of what many of our sisters and brothers are feeling this time around.

Eight years ago, I only addressed how we move forward as a congregation comprised of people on both sides of the political divide. Namely that we remember that we are first and foremost Christians, members of the Body of Christ. An identity that takes priority over any other, including political affiliation. An identity that calls for us to adhere to certain core principles and beliefs that take priority over any others, including political ideologies. None of that has changed. It is all still true and applicable. Yet, there is a significant difference this time around. Unlike 2016, there are many who are profoundly fearful of what the future may hold. Sure, there was an element of that eight years ago. But this time around, it's different. It's palpable. I am not exaggerating when I say that many people are downright scared. Many people in this parish, many people in this room, are downright scared of what the next four years might hold.

I want to address this, but first I want to take a look at our Gospel reading for today—which is, by the way, different from the one we had eight years ago. Because our Gospel reading provides something of an analogy for what happened in the campaign and in the aftermath of the election. Not a perfect one, but we can work with it. In addition, the Gospel reading

provides an image for how we as a faith community can at least begin to address the feelings, and particularly the fear, that so many are experiencing.

Our Gospel today is the well-known story of the “widow’s mite.” Jesus starts off making an observation about scribes. To be fair, not all scribes, but at least some of them. Elsewhere, Jesus actually agrees with some scribes on particular issues. For context, scribes were religious leaders who, while not priests, were scholars of the Torah, of the Law. Jesus observes that some scribes “like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!” In short, some scribes like to flaunt their position and authority. They like to be seen and to be adored by the masses. It’s all about putting on a show, demonstrating how special they are, at least in their own minds. Jesus goes on to imply that these are corrupt hypocrites. He notes that “they devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.” This is a reference to the fact that widows who did not have male relatives to take care of them and their financial affairs would often rely on scribes to manage their affairs for them. There were those scribes who were unscrupulous and who would manage a widow’s affairs, purportedly as an act of care and concern, as an act of protection, but who actually cheated the widow in order to make themselves richer.

Enter the widow in the Gospel story. Jesus observes a poor widow putting two small copper coins in the temple treasury. As he tells his disciples, “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.” The implication is that she is one of those widows who had been cheated by a scribe.

We often hear this story interpreted in the context of stewardship. Especially since it appears at the time of year when parishes typically do their annual stewardship campaigns. The message being that if the poor widow can give all that she has to the temple, we can at least pony up a lousy ten percent for a tithe to the church. And while this is one interpretation—and maybe one we can hear as part of our “Walk in Love” stewardship campaign?—while that is one interpretation, that is not the only one. That is not where Jesus was actually going in this Gospel story. For Jesus, this juxtaposition between the scribes and the widow is meant to point to the hypocrisy of the scribe. Serving as a critique of the powers that be. That the scribe is more concerned with his own self-interests and with what others think of him. Sure, he gives to the temple treasury, but out of the abundance derived through ill-gotten gains. He gives, but mainly for show, so that people will see and think “oh, how generous he is.” The scribe giving a token of his wealth, compared to the widow, who gives all she has. Not because she needs to in order to look good in the eyes of others. No one would criticize a poor widow for not putting anything in the treasury and instead using it for food or other necessities. And yet, she gives nonetheless. Not for show, not to look good, but out of a genuine devotion to the temple. Out of genuine love for God. Demonstrating that the widow is actually far more faithful, more generous, and more righteous than the pretentious scribes.

Boiling down the two images to their basics . . . one is of an egotistical, self-centered person of wealth and power who is only out for himself. And he is willing to do whatever it takes, to step on whoever it takes, to achieve his aims. The other is a person who, despite being one on the

margins, is not seeking any personal gain, but rather is willing to give everything she has to benefit others.

As we take a critical look at the scribe as compared to the poor widow, we start to see some parallels, although not perfect, to what we have just been through in the 2024 presidential election. A candidate whose basic message was one of rehashing perceived personal grievances, demeaning and denigrating those who disagree with him or who are perceived as “other,” and issuing threats to use governmental structures to prosecute those who he views as the enemy and standing in the way of him achieving his personal goals. And the other candidate focusing on a message of hope, of inclusion, and of opportunity.

Those were the choices. And the majority of those voting in this election made their choice. They chose who they want to lead our nation and, by extension, what they view the values of our nation to be and what they want our nation to look like. In so doing, they have made the choice for all of us—which is how our system works. And we must abide by that choice, like it or not. But that does not lessen the feelings that so many are experiencing. That does not lessen the pain, the frustration, the anger, the fear, the sense of hopelessness. Particularly among those who are viewed by some as being lesser or other. Particularly those who have already had rights that stood for generations systematically eroded. Particularly those who have relied on other fundamental rights that are now being threatened. All because of who they are; because of race or ethnicity, religion, sex or gender identity, or sexual orientation. And add to that threats against those who subscribe to differing political ideologies and perspectives.

Some may say I’m over-reacting. That I’m exaggerating the threat. The truth is, we don’t know what will happen in the future. These fears are based on the constant rhetoric we heard throughout the campaign. There may still be sufficient guardrails in place to protect what remains of our fundamental rights. But what I am reporting is real-life reactions. From real-life people. Including from members of this parish. Including those who are sitting next to you in the pews. Those feelings are real and cannot be dismissed. They will not be dismissed; not on my watch.

We have a choice in how we move forward. While our Gospel reading for today provides, as I have already laid out, something of the choices that brought us to where we are today, it also provides an image for just how we move forward. If we got to this point because of the metaphorical image of the corrupt and hypocritical scribe, the way we move forward is through the image of the widow. The one who relied not on her own self-interests, but relied on the one thing she knew would be able to help her move forward: the temple. Or, in our case, the Church.

There are three areas that we need to work on, if we are to move forward. How to deal with those who differ from us. How to deal with the very real and raw feelings so many are experiencing. And what we can do to make a difference in what has happened.

How to deal with those who differ from us? I addressed that eight years ago, and the answer is the same. We can criticize and condemn the majority of the electorate who voted to bring us to this point. We can speculate about doom and gloom in the future. All of which only further

emphasizes the division in our nation. In other words, we can continue to be part of the division-making. Or, as Christians we can hold to our values. Particularly as summarized in the baptismal covenant, which we renewed last week. To proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. To seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves. To strive for justice and peace among all people and to respect the dignity of every human being. We can use these values and the lessons of our Lord to work for reconciliation with those who differ from us. We can look for that which we have in common, for that which binds us together: the fact that each of us, regardless of political affiliation, is a beloved child of God.

How to deal with the very real and raw feelings, particularly the fear, that so many are experiencing? As I noted in my pastoral letter in response to the election, I am committed to making sure that St. Gregory's is a place of shelter where all are cared for and nurtured, regardless of who they are. A place where all can feel safe. A place where all can be themselves with no fear of judgement. A place where all can be free to express how they are feeling. A place where all are supported. That is who St. Gregory's is. All are welcome here. All are loved here. All are encouraged to thrive here. This will take all of us committing to those same values and working to make them a reality.

And how can we make a difference in what has happened, and in what will continue to happen as we move forward? That we continue, individually and in our communal life, to live the Gospel. To continue to demonstrate our love for God and our love for our neighbors in our words, but most particularly in our actions. Especially in our words and actions outside those doors. That we may continue to be examples of God's love in our broken and hurting world. Through our example, we might, just maybe, make a difference, no matter how small. And we know that over time, those small differences add up to something profound.

I don't know what the future holds. But what I do know, if there is anything I have learned in my own faith journey, is that when we are faithful to God, God is faithful to us. That is what the widow in today's Gospel represents. She gave all she had to live on to the temple, to God. The implication of that story, the reason Jesus told that story, was to demonstrate her unwavering faith in God. She had faith that if she did her part, if she was faithful to God, God would be faithful to her. That she would be taken care of and all would be well. Let that poor widow and the hope she holds on to as if her life depends on it—for it does—let that be our icon, our guide, as together we travel into our unknown future. Not in fear, but in hope.