

OUT OF NOTHING ...EVERYTHING

Mark 12:38-44

October 10, 2024

This sounds like the perfect text for a sermon on stewardship. Jesus “Sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury.” (12:41) You would think Jesus had better things to do with his time than to watch people putting their offering into the plate. I’m suggesting that that was not at all what Jesus was watching. He was watching the people, not their offering.

Let’s take another look at this text. Jesus was teaching in the synagogue. He was talking about contrasts. Mark repeatedly uses the “scribes” as a sign of self-centeredness, of seeing oneself set apart, of seeking the spotlight. As we read, he describes the scribes with phrases like “walking around in long robes,” “seeking respect in the marketplace,” “enjoying the best seats in the synagogues or places of honor at banquets,” “saying long prayers for the sake of appearance.” Then Jesus sat down. Wait ... I left out one phrase he used, and that’s an important part of his teaching: the scribes “devoured widows’ houses.” (12:40)

All the other behaviors seem pretty straight forward: long robes, seeking respect, seats of importance, and long prayers. But I tell you that the message for us today lies in the phrase: they devoured widows’ houses. As I suggested Mark uses the persona of the scribes to refer to the self-centeredness in society. Now I suggest to you that Mark uses the persona of the widow—sometimes paired with the poor—to refer to the idea of

emptiness, of nothing to lose—of the least, the last, the lost, etc. Remember my suggesting many times before that it is in the least, last, and lost that his point is made. And why does Jesus do this? I believe he is saying, not only that are they polar opposites—scribes and widows— but that the one causes the other. In other gospel stories it was the tax collectors. In each scenario the point is that the dominant group benefits by taking money—we might also say social status—from those lower or less prominent in society. It's a kind of institutional structuring of society, whether by Roman occupation—that is, the case of the tax collectors—or by rabbinic hierarchy—in the case of the scribes, whereby the dominant group preserves itself at the expense of the other. The money that was being put into the treasury was money given out of the abundance that they were able to store up at the expense of another.

The widow has nothing—no husband (a source of value), no job (a source of income), and no “house” because the scribes have devoured it. They have collected their abundance at the expense of “the other.”

The Gospel message I hear in this text—the Good News, the challenging news for us today—is on the one hand a call for justice in our society and on the other hand a call for understanding that true value in life is not measured by the amount you deposit in the offering plate, but by the nature of your soul. And it demands of us a self-examination of our own persona. This I see as the other key phrase in our text, that offers us insight into the nature of our very being: “out of her poverty she

has put in everything she had.” (12:44) ... or my way of saying it: out of nothing... everything.

I said at the beginning of my sermon, this is a great scriptural text for a stewardship sermon. It contrasts stewardship out of our abundance with stewardship out of poverty, or out of nothing. We all know that the church needs money and we are equipped in one or another to make our pledge. But I am challenging you this day that the church even more than that needs your all—your everything.

Out of nothing, we are told in the creation story that out of nothing God created everything. We know as believers that out of death God raised Jesus to everlasting life. We read story after story in scripture of Jesus’ disciples making the decision to abandon everything and follow Jesus.

1. I’m thinking of James and John, who left their father, their job as fishermen, to follow Jesus. (Matt. R:18-20)
2. I’m thinking of Bartemeus, the blind man healed by Jesus, who “threw off his coat”, the only possession he had, to follow Jesus. (Mark 10:46)
3. On the other hand, I’m thinking of Jesus’ answer to the question “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said “sell all that you have and give it to the poor—we could say to the widow.” They were not able to do that and walked away (Matt. 19:21-22)

The widow in the temple out of nothing ... gave everything.

The stewardship message that I deliver today is a call to stewardship out of nothing, a decision to give your all, a renewed decision to follow Jesus.

What does it mean to you today to give your all?

Some have taken that quite literally and stepped away from the materialistic world to become monks or nuns.

Others see it as working in one way or another to bring about a more just society in which to live—a society that does not require someone to lose for another to win.

Maybe it means a re-commitment to follow Jesus. So, as we draw to a close our annual stewardship drive, make your decision: be all that you can be. Above all, make your stewardship commitment to our Lord Jesus.

This makes me think of the words of the spiritual: “I have decided to follow Jesus...no turning back, no turning back.”

Or these words from another spiritual:

“Some folk would rather have houses and land.

Some folk choose silver and gold.

These things they treasure and forget about their soul.

I’ve decided to make Jesus my choice.” (LEVAS II #68)

How appropriate that we now sing, as we are able:

“Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee.”

Hymn # 707