

“Living on Holy Ground”

Mark 12: 28- 44

Market Square Presbyterian Church
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

The Reverend Anne M. Ross
November 10, 2024

At age 52 after my children had graduated from college, I entered seminary as a second career student. I was so fortunate, because there were other middle-aged second career students who also entered that same year. We learned that we were the largest number of middle-aged second career students in the history of the seminary. Ten of us quickly bonded and became friends. Someone named our group OPUS. O – P – U – S. Older People Up to Something. Being in that group became a great source of social and emotional strength the three years I was in seminary.

And I have to admit that I was a bit suspicious when Bruce Humphrey asked me to preach on the Sunday following an historic election. I wondered, was Bruce up to something? But then he told me that he and his wife were attending a music conference in Connecticut and that he would be back on Sunday morning. I felt less suspicious.

After studying the chapters in Mark’s gospel both preceding and following the passage I read this morning, I had to wonder if Mark was up to something. Mark placed the familiar story of the widow placing two copper coins in the Temple treasury immediately before the chapter when Jesus tells his disciples that there will be a day in the future the Temple will be destroyed. Was that important, I wondered. I learned that scholars view the destruction of the Temple in a multi-layered way and will not be significant for looking at the widow giving two coins in the treasury.

In the 12th chapter, Mark draws a picture that contrasts the wealthy giving large sums of money out of their abundance with the widow giving two copper coins out of her poverty. Those coins are minute, by the way. They were the smallest unit of money in that time and place. They were worth about 1/64th of a denarius, a day’s wage for a poorly paid laborer; and the woman, having only two, gave her all. Her giving to the Temple came from the heart – it was genuine, it was real. The wealthy’s offering seemed insincere.

Jesus talked to his disciples about the scribes. We know that lots of burnt offerings and rule following give status and power to the scribes in the religious social structure in Jerusalem society. Jesus observed that they

wore long ostentatious robes in the marketplace. The implication was that their faith may be hypocritical and all for show. We learn, too, that they are Jesus' opponents because prior to this scene they were asking him questions, trying to trip him up. They asked him two questions before asking a third and final question, "What is the greatest commandment?" Jesus answered, "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." "Well done," they say to Jesus.

Mark's picture was now complete: he had included Jesus' remarks to his disciples about the differences between those rich peoples' faith in giving money to the Temple out of their abundant wealth and contrasted that with the widow's faith giving everything she had: two small copper coins.

We really don't know anything about the widow other than she was poor and that she placed everything she had into the treasury. Mark left a lot out when he wrote that scene. We know nothing about that woman's heart. I like to imagine that she had loved her late husband deeply; that they had children, whom she also loves with all her heart and soul. I am using holy imagination here and I believe that we could think this woman knew what love is and that she was so very grateful to God for the blessings in her life that out of her gratitude to God whom she loved with all her heart, soul, mind, and strength, and she gave everything she had, two small copper coins. I imagine the widow was grateful because of what God had given to her. She trusted God and loved God because she knew love.

Living when she did, in that society, how else could a woman – and a poor widow - express her gratitude to God?

Sometimes **I think I live** in a parallel universe. That is, I know I live in a society where there is domestic violence, child abuse, wrongful convictions of innocent people, some who are in jail for decades (some are later executed – innocent people!); I know about consumerism, road rage, extreme disparities between wealthy and the poor, that our society is increasingly looking more at screens than talking with people across a table during meals – I know all this, and yet, I know another world. I am so grateful living in a world where there are loving people, where there are intimate marriages that last; friendships that span decades; I am grateful to know parents and grandparents (and I am one of them) who deeply love their children and grandchildren. I am so grateful my grandchild brings joy to my life and warms my heart every time he asks, "Tell me another Mr. Johnny story, Grandma." And I am grateful that I know good and decent people like you who live their faith: who care about feeding the hungry, who care for the poor, care for the environment, care for peacekeeping, who keep the rest of us aware of nations far beyond the borders of this country. I am grateful for this church and its inclusive mission.

There is an Austrian born Benedictine monk, Brother David Steindl-Rast, who is an author, scholar, lecturer, and who is known for his message about gratefulness. He says it is the true source of happiness. He has been called "the grandfather of gratitude." His message is that the root of joy is gratefulness; it is not joy that makes us grateful, it is gratitude that makes us joyful. Gratefulness is a way of being, a way of living and it is a

spiritual practice. To trust life is the foundation, he writes. Either trust life or be fearful of life. Trust is the beginning of a grateful life.

Brother David suggests that when you take a walk, mute all your devices, and learn to respond to what you are seeing as if it is the first day of your life or the very last day. When I have walked in the morning and done this, I have loved it. I found myself thinking, “Look at that! Look at those yellow leaves that the sun shines as if they are golden.” “Wow, look at those red maple leaves against that blue sky!” Or if I am not taking a walk, but just enjoying the beauty of a sky, one of my favorite times is to look at bare branches with the backdrop of a sky at dusk. Or I love watching birds taking bird baths in my saucer of water, I get a thrill at their beauty: bluebirds, cardinals, chickadees – they love to drink and/or take a bath. They are beautiful creatures of our Creator God!

Brother David says to “Look at the sky, look at the clouds coming and going, look at the faces of the people you meet – think of the story behind their face, the story of their ancestors. Open your eyes and your heart. Cultivate gratefulness. Let the gratefulness overflow: then it will be a very good day.”

Keith read Psalm 146 this morning that speaks so well to trust in God and gratefulness.

Praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord, O my soul!

I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.
When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that day their plans perish.

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord their God,
who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;
who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food for the hungry....

The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;
the Lord loves the righteous.

The Lord watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

The Lord will reign forever,

your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the Lord!

And here we are, post- election. It was a long and anxious time of campaigning and the election results left some of us reeling and off kilter. What are we to do now?

Author, lecturer, and religious historian Diana Butler Bass, expressed a response on Thursday to that question, “What are we to do now?” She reworked a familiar poem by Howard Thurman, *The Work of Christmas*, and applied it to this time.

The Work of Christmas by Howard Thurman

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins....

Diana Butler Bass reworked it (and I revised it a bit):

When the noise of the campaigns is stilled,
When the signs are taken down,
When the voters are back at their jobs,
The work of Christmas begins.
 To find the lost
 To heal the broken
 To feed the hungry
 To bring peace among the people
 To release the prisoner
 To make music in the heart.

We do not trust in princes or in mortals. We trust in God. We come back into the story of life with a deep sense of **gratitude and trust**. We strive for the kingdom of God on earth and its righteousness; to feed the hungry, to bring peace in our families and with our neighbors, to heal the broken, to make music in the heart.

How blessed we are, to be given gifts of life, love, and beauty.

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**