

PENNY-WISE

Mark 12:38-44

Sunday, November 8, 2009

Rev. James Campbell

A week ago Friday I was honored to participate in the Installation of the Rev. Kaji Spellman as Associate Pastor of St. Peter's Lutheran Church over on the East Side. Kaji is an example of what the Formula of Agreement between the UCC, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Reformed churches really means. We have agreed to be Christians together, to share sacraments and ministry... and yes, even ministers. Kaji is ordained in the United Church of Christ. She is a member of this congregation and yet God has called her to serve the good people of St. Peter's Lutheran Church.

Now, we might have our Formula of Agreement, but that doesn't mean that all the differences between us have suddenly vanished. We still talk a little different and worship a little different and look a little different. Kaji's invitation requested that I wear a white alb with a red stole. When I told her that I didn't own a white alb, she replied: "No worries. "We've got tons of them over here." And indeed they did. The sacristy was overflowing with beautiful vestments. It was a veritable treasure trove of religious frou-frou. Pastor Brown from Advent helped this poor congregational minister find the

right size alb and a snazzy stole. We were lined up for the procession and given our marching orders. At the front of the line was the Lutheran bishop, complete with miter and carrying a crook. That took me back a little. But then I caught a glimpse of the Rev. Freeman Palmer, our new Interim Regional Conference Minister in the UCC. Freeman was dressed to the nines in a flowing, brocaded robe fit for a bishop! And then there was the Rev. Dr. Serene Jones, president of Union Theological Seminary, ordained in our United Church of Christ, wearing what can only be described as a flowing scarlet cape. Just before we processed into the sanctuary, I chuckled to myself and thought: "If my New England Congregationalists could see me now!"

The procession began and the entire congregation stood out of respect. We paraded ourselves to the very front rows, the places of honor, where we sat our beautiful selves down in front of an admiring crowd. And I would be a liar if I said that I didn't have fun.

Then on Monday, I began to study for this week's sermon and read: "Beware of the scribes, who 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!" Ouch! Sometimes Jesus says things that make

me nervous: things like pick up your cross and turn the other cheek and die to yourself and beware of religious people who parade around holy places in long robes.

Now the truth is that Jesus rarely bothered with such inconsequential things as how one dresses. For Jesus, it was always about behavior and predisposition – especially as it impacts the poor and vulnerable. It's not the clothing that matters; it's the attitude that sometimes goes with it.

In today's lesson we find Jesus in the Temple on the Tuesday before he was executed by Rome. For some weeks now, he had been wowing the crowds by taking on the establishment and its abuse of the poor. He used provocative words to deliver his wildly entertaining populist message. Mark reports that the crowds listened to him with delight. I imagine that they were especially delighted when Jesus took on the clergy. "Beware of them" he said. "They love to parade around in their holy outfits and pray elaborate prayers while all the time devouring the poor widows' houses."

Sometimes Jesus used hyperbole to make a point. But this was not one of those times. The scribes were literally devouring the widows' houses. A

widow in a patriarchal society was completely dependent upon living male relatives who would decide how much money to give her. And if she had no relatives, then she was, quite literally, dependent upon the kindness of strangers. And we all know that not all strangers are kind. So, it was not unheard of for widows to be forced into prostitution or to simply starve to death.

Sometimes, if a woman had no male relatives, then the religious authorities would swoop in to help manage the dead man's estate. Of course, the scribes would charge a fee for their service. Historian Chad Myers notes that practice was rife with "embezzlement and abuse." Sometimes the scribes literally took the widow's house as payment for services rendered.

So, on this Tuesday of Holy Week, Jesus and his disciples were in the Temple, sitting in the Court of the Women. Women were not allowed to go any further into the holy place. And the Court of the Women is where the Treasury was. Isn't that interesting? I guess the women's money was holy enough, even if they weren't. At the Treasury, the worshippers would pour their coins into 13 large metal containers. You can imagine the noise – metal against metal. In addition, it was customary for the donors to announce how much they were

giving before they dropped the money into the containers. Imagine such a custom in church!

A widow appeared, walked up to the Treasury and announced: "Two Leptas!"

It was a measly amount. It took 4 to 8 Leptas to make one penny. What she gave was quite literally a drop in the bucket. But she got Jesus' attention.

"Truly I tell you," he said, "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."

I suppose that over my lifetime, I have heard at least two dozen sermons on this text. And inevitably they lead to a guilt-laden plea for more generous stewardship. Well, that is one lesson of this text. There is something to be said about the generosity of this woman. But stewardship is not the only lesson to be found here.

Most of us like to think of ourselves as identifying with the widow, of giving what we can, of trying to do the right thing, of being on the side of the poor, at least philosophically. But the truth is that it's almost impossible for us not to

be scribes. It's not just that most of us give out of our abundance. It's also that by the nature of our citizenship, of where and how we live, that we are the rich of the world. We may not steal people's houses, but our way of life does. Our lifestyle is sustained by products and infrastructures and government meddling and corporate culture designed to keep things exactly the way they are. We just happen to be on the winning side of that proposition. It sounds pretty scribe-like to me. But we are not left without hope. The widow sees to that.

It is so easy to be overwhelmed by the inequities of the world and the systems of abuse. Forget the world. I have a hard time dealing with the inequities of the Upper West Side. It seems that every week there are more and more people begging on the streets and coming to the church for help. It's enough to make you want to give up or to hide behind cynicism.

But then there is the widow. If anyone had a legitimate excuse to give up, certainly she did. If anyone had a reason to doubt the integrity of the religious institutions charged with doing good, she did. She certainly could have been more penny-wise and simply used that money for herself to buy some bread. But that was not how she understood her role in the world. The widow

embraced her responsibility to help heal the world, even without much to give. She gave what she had and trusted the rest to God. In other words, she was faithful. And because she was, her act of obedience is enshrined in the pages of Holy Scripture, while all those men in flowing robes are long forgotten.

We cannot fix the world all by ourselves. We cannot lift up the poor all by ourselves. We cannot even fix ourselves by ourselves. But we can give what we have. And we can choose to believe that in God's economy every act of kindness, every movement toward justice, every effort at reconciliation, every contribution, no matter how small, somehow moves the whole world in the right direction.

That's the faith of the widow. And if you can believe that, that even the smallest gift can change the world, then that will change your life. It will change your faith. It will heal your cynicism. It might even put a bounce in your step - because it's the Gospel, as shown to us by a faithful widow.

Thanks be to God. Amen.