

Sunday November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Remembrance Day

**PRAYER:** We praise you, God of all being! You give food to the hungry, set prisoners free, open the eyes of the blind, and lift the spirits of those bowed down. Because you are righteous, you sent Christ to redeem the lost and the wayward. We come into your presence enlivened by your Holy Spirit and full of new hope to give you the honour due your glorious name. Amen.

**WORDS OF ASSURANCE:** Remember the words of scripture where it says, “For Christ has entered...into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf...to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.” All who repent and eagerly await him have the assurance that their sins are forgiven.

**STEWARDSHIP:** One of life’s pressing temptations is to see our giving to God as an afterthought. We calculate what we have received and give God a portion of what is left over after we have looked after our priorities and our needs and our desires. In addressing our need for a new focus in our generosity we read in Proverbs 3:9, “Honour the Lord with your wealth as the first charge on all your earnings.” Let us now give our Lord the best of what we have as we give our tithes and offerings.

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** Great are your words, O God; you make our hearts glad. Wherever we look we see your goodness. Throughout history you have restored the fortunes of your chosen people. In barren lands you led them to living waters. When they were hungry, you sent manna to sustain them. Those who went forth weeping returned home with shouts of joy, recounting the benefits of your wondrous love.

We give thanks for Christ, in whose name we inherit your mercy, and confess anew our faith in him as our high priest. He bore our weaknesses in his body, and thereby made us strong. We give thanks that he lives among us today to encourage the fainthearted, empower the weak, comfort the lonely, and bring release to the captives. Through him we are able to serve above and beyond our collective abilities, and for that legacy we give you thanks.

We give thanks for your Holy Spirit, who renews our flagging spirits and sends us forth with praise on our lips. In the midst of doubt, your Spirit brings clarity; when we are weary, your Spirit revives us. We can rely on your Spirit during lonely adventures; throughout our wanderings, we are never without your presence.

Our hearts beat with joy, thanks to your graciousness. Our eyes see more clearly, thanks to the vision of Christ our Savior. Our whole selves move freely, thanks to your indwelling Spirit. We shout glad alleluias, so great are your works.

**BENEDICTION:** Let us go and make our contribution to God, to this world and all who dwell therein. Let us not scramble to sit in the most honourable places or rush to recite the longest prayers. But let us, in our giving, offer up all the living we have. Amen.

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Mark 12:38-44  
“Out of Abundance”

*A policeman was heading home after a long, hard day on patrol. He had dealt with a whole succession of difficult people, and a mountain of frustrating paperwork. All he wanted at this point was to kick back, unwind, enjoy some peace and quiet, and maybe watch a few innings of baseball on TV. But, as he neared home, he was startled by a vehicle that came careening around a sharp curve and narrowly missed his squad car. As the car passed within a few inches of him, the other driver shouted “Pig!”*

*The police officer was suddenly energized. He slammed on his brakes, all set to turn his squad car around, and head off in hot pursuit. But as he rounded the curve, ... he ran head-on into a large pig that was standing in the middle of the road!* It’s a lesson we should learn early in life if we’re lucky: don’t assume! No matter how confident we are in our understanding of the issue. No matter how certain we think we are of another’s reasoning or motives.

No matter how obvious the point may be to us. We need to remember that effective communication is far more complicated, and difficult, than we think. With barriers like cultural differences, personal “filters,” different definitions, etc., it’s amazing that any of us ever understand one another. But these aren’t the most difficult obstacles to understanding each other. The biggest reason we aren’t able to hear what another person is saying to us is simply... “fear!”

Oh, I know we may camouflage it behind anger, self-importance, or any number of other false fronts, but at the root is fear. Fear of being “found out,” or of being disappointed, or of not getting what we want. It’s a powerful, if crippling motivator. And most of us can summon up plenty of reasons why we shouldn’t take another person at face value. Honest communication requires trust, and taking a risk. And we’ve been burned too many times. So, we settle for safety, make the natural assumption, and run head-on into our own version of that pig in the middle of the road as we journey down life’s highway!

There is a better way. A way that recognizes our similarities. That sees others as a source of community and healing. That looks past our own frustration, and previous disappointments, to explore the possibility that even a “stranger” may have something positive to say. The Apostle Paul described it in 1 Corinthians, chapter 13. It’s the “higher way” of love. I almost hesitate to use that term these days because of the way our culture misuses it. But when you read Paul’s description, try substituting “maturity.” It’s a perfect fit. The risks are higher for this way of living, but so are the rewards. (Capt. David J Atwater)

Another (anonymous) writer cautions: “To laugh is to risk appearing the fool. To weep is to risk appearing sentimental. To reach out for another is to risk involvement. To expose feelings is to risk exposing your true self. To place your ideas, your dreams before a crowd is to risk their loss. To love is to risk not being loved in return. To live is to risk dying. To hope is to risk despair. To try is to risk failure. But risks must be taken, because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing. The person who risks nothing, does nothing, has nothing and is nothing. They may avoid suffering and sorrow but they cannot learn, feel, change, grow, love, live. Chained by their certitudes they are a slave, they have forfeited their freedom. Only a person who risks is free.”

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With all this in our minds, I now draw your attention to our Gospel lesson for today. A lesson about assumptions, risks, and fear. And the first thing we must understand is that these two little paragraphs in this passage, are not to be taken separately, as we might be inclined to do. Typically, preachers will opt for the story about the widow and her two copper coins, and ignore the paragraph before it. However, Mark's intention for the reader, is to tie these two stories together, because they form a stark comparison.

The first paragraph of our lesson today is about the scribes that Jesus mentions, who I argue lived in fear. Perhaps we have never considered this before. I say this because I conclude that the scribes described here feared being: vulnerable, becoming insignificant, or being financially destitute. Therefore, out of their fear, they manipulated circumstances to benefit themselves. For example: they demanded acknowledgment in public places by wearing showy garments.

They also finagled their way to the seats of honour at the synagogue and banquets. They lived off the generosity of the most vulnerable people in their society in the name of religious pursuits; in this case widows. All things considered, I think that they were in reality a very anxious bunch. The scribes in Jesus' mind that day, feared not being in control of their own situation, and they did everything they could to maintain, at least, the illusion of control.

I am pretty sure that what Jesus wants us to feel in thinking about these scribes is not judgment, but rather compassion. A sadness that men who knew the scriptures so well, and committed to teaching it to others, failed to learn one of its most important lessons. In a nut shell they struggled to trust in the goodness of God. Trust that means to place everything we: are, have, and think we control: into the hands of a just and merciful God.

It's a lesson Jesus has been trying to get across through most of the gospel of Mark, and frankly the whole of scripture points to this truth. The rich young ruler, the disciples trying to decide who is the greatest, John and James wanting the seats of honour: all point the same direction. If you do not trust God fully, no matter what your circumstances, you are living in fear.

You are assuming that words like, God loves you, wants the best for you, and all things will work out for good for those who love the Lord: are just that. Words! And lest we think this is just about a group of scribes thousands of years ago; think again. I suspect, if you are like me, too much of our lives are governed by fear. Fear of tomorrow, fear of losing control, fear of feeling insignificant, and so much more.

In 1 John 4:8 we are told that "Perfect love casts out fear". But still we resist the transforming and redeeming work of that perfect love in Christ Jesus. We continue to make assumptions, about ourselves, our situations, and each other: out of fear. We continue to think we know what is best for us, when clearly, we have been tainted by fear. And no amount of preaching, bible study, or even prayer, will improve our lives until we deal with the fear.

So, to strengthen the point, Mark ties the passage about the scribes to another little story. A very famous story. These stories probably did not happen on the same day, but Mark connects them. It is as if he is saying to his readers, "I want you to think about your level of fear in a different way. Instead of a negative example, here is a positive one.

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One day, Jesus was in the temple, sitting down opposite the temple treasury watching people put their offerings in the receptacles. I say receptacles, because in the temple court yard, on the wall of the temple were trumpet shaped funnels, that collected the gifts, and directed them inside a secure room for later collection. No envelop secretary needed here; nor tax receipts issued. It was a very public way to offer your gifts. Mark then notes that many rich people made a grand display of making their contributions.

Perhaps going as far as to make a kind of mini parade, in the hopes that others would notice them giving to the temple. Some gave large sums. The receptacles were likely brass, so the coins would be tinkling as they rolled into the temple. The amount varied among the worshippers, but it would still likely be only a tithe, essentially ten percent, which the law demanded. I am sure there were many sincere people who gave for the right reasons, but ask yourself why some made a public show of their legal obligation under the law.

I think it was fear. First of all, perhaps it was fear that God would punish them if they did not give their tithe. Maybe it was fear that their neighbours, and friends, would think they were shirking their duties. They wanted to be seen as loyal to the temple and the nation of Israel. But also, because they gave out of their abundance, they also feared trusting God. Intellectually, perhaps, they claimed they knew God cared for them, but in their hearts, not so much.

I am sure the rich young ruler gave his required ten percent, but still he lived in fear. Fear of trusting fully in God. It is hard for a rich person, and remember that we North Americans are quite rich in comparison to the rest of the world, to enter the Kingdom of God. We trust more in what we have accumulated, or achieved, than God. There is some truth to the idea that you really only own something if you can give it away. Otherwise it owns you.

As Jesus was sitting in the temple, watching people give their tithes and offerings, he is immediately drawn to the one of the most inconspicuous persons there that day. In the midst of all the pomp and ceremony of others giving out of their abundance, a woman who was a widow, comes and offers two copper coins valued at about 1/64<sup>th</sup> of a denarius; a denarius being a day's wages. She comes quietly, without fanfare. Her two coins don't make much of a tinkling sound as they tumble down the receptacles. Then she departs, as quietly as she came.

She was not noticed by anyone it seems, other than Jesus. So, Jesus calls his disciples over, and points her out. Why does he point her out? Could it be that after all the lessons on the nature of the Kingdom of God, and what it requires of us, along comes someone who gets it. Not a Pharisee, a Scribe, or even one of Jesus' disciples, but a widow, whose poverty is absolute given that she gave all she had; two little copper coins.

“Behold!” Jesus could easily have said, “someone not governed by fear, but by their full trust in God”. Remember Jesus has been sitting there watching people undertake what should be acts of faith, only to be moved by the person who gave the smallest amount. The two copper coins would not be able to buy very much, if anything, kind of like our now defunct pennies. Jesus was moved by this woman's sacrifice and commitment to God represented by the temple. The disciples were probably left scratching their heads.

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I do not know much about the game of poker, especially why it is considered a sport, and now televised on TSN and other sports networks. But from what I do know is that there comes a point in every poker game when one of the players, confidently pushes all they have into the pot and says, "I'm all in". It's a bold move. It is an all or nothing move. If you win the hand you get a big payday. If you lose the hand, you are out, busted.

In terms of confidence in God, the unnamed widow is "all in". The two copper coins was all she had. Her economic vulnerability is now complete. She is at the complete mercy of God. She is staking her life on the grace of God. So, how does the action of this widow make you feel? I mean, to be honest, judging the scribes and their devouring of the widows' home as heartless and evil, is a relatively easy thing to do.

But to emulate, or follow this particular widow's example, well that is a whole other matter. It is interesting that at our Talk-back session on October 31<sup>st</sup>, someone made the point that Bartimaeus, after being healed, could more easily follow Jesus than the rich young ruler. Bartimaeus had nothing to lose. It was relatively an easy thing for him to go all in, in following Jesus. The same goes for the widow in today's lesson.

When all you have is two small copper coins to throw into the pot, even if it is all you have, maybe considerably easier than selling a vast holding of wealth like the rich young ruler. The bible tells us that the "love of money is the root of all evil". As true as this is, I also believe that money can, if we let it, fuel our fear. We fear, for example, losing money, not having enough money, not having enough money to support ourselves in our retirement.

It is the kind of fear that can kill us. There was a woman in West Palm Beach, who died alone at the age of 71. The coroner's report was tragic. "Cause of death: malnutrition." This dear lady wasted away to 50 pounds. Investigators who found her said the place where she lived was a veritable pigpen, the biggest mess you can imagine. One seasoned investigator declared he'd never seen a residence in greater disarray.

The woman had for some time begged for food from her neighbours, and gotten what clothes she had from the Salvation Army. From all outward appearances she was a penniless recluse, a pitiful forgotten widow. But such was not the case. Amid the jumble of her unclean, disheveled belongings, two keys were found at two different banks. What they found was absolutely unbelievable.

The first safety-deposit contained over seven hundred AT&T stock certificates, plus hundreds of other valuable certificates, bonds, and solid financial securities, not to mention a stack of cash amounting to nearly \$200,000. The second box had not stock certificates, only more currency -lots of it-\$600,000 to be exact. Adding it all up the woman who starved to death had in her possession over a million dollars. (Tales of a Tardy Oxcart, p,611) Clearly, I think we conclude that this poor woman lived in fear.

Her reliance of keeping every penny, destroyed her. Just like the scribes Jesus described, fear of trusting fully in God destroys the abundant life God offers to us. Fear plays on the mind, causing us to make bad decisions.

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To make excuses to avoid our commitment and involvement in the Kingdom of God. And lest you think I am immune to this struggle, I assure you I am not. I am constantly wrestling with my level of conviction to the biblical promises we all hold so dear. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” “All things work for good, for those called according to his purpose.” “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

I am terrified by the story in Acts 5 of the husband and wife team of Ananias and Sapphira, who claimed to have sold a piece of property to support the early church but held some back. Peter told them each in turn that it was not to the church or apostle’s they lied to, but God himself. They immediately dropped dead from their transgression. The danger here, and for the scribes, is trying to project a level of commitment to the Kingdom of God that we simply do not possess.

How I wish, like the widow we met today, I could go all in, or at the very least more in than I am now, to the Kingdom of God. Instead, I know that much of what I do, or give to God is out of my abundance. God help us all to grow enough in our faith, to hold nothing back.