

Message: "Faith's Lack of Showmanship" - 11-7-21

Scripture Lesson: Mark 12:38-44

³⁸As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

⁴¹He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴For 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."

Recently I was asked by our Mountain Sky Annual Conference leadership to start a new group for pastors in our area, a group aimed at support, fellowship, and advocacy. This is something our conference has recognized as a pressing need for many of my colleagues as well as myself, for due to Covid shut-downs and protocols we often face profound stresses, including numerous deaths in their congregations, overpowering isolation, congregational hostility, and a general loss of stability they are often blamed for unfairly. There are many, many pastors out there who are barely hanging on.

So there has been a greater effort to organize our Conference around supportive, individualized connection between pastors. Having led our Missoula Area Clergy Circuit for five years, I can attest to the positive results of regular, authentic interaction between peers. More than once, a pastor in my circuit has looked at the others in the group and said, "It is so very good to know you have my back."

When Conference asked me to lead this new group, I was quick to say "yes." But then, they described the make up of this new group of pastors, who were to be those who had been in ministry for over twenty years. They wanted to call this the Longevity Circuit. All of a sudden, I felt very old. What would it be like to be the presiding elder of the Longevity Circuit? More to the point, I would be leading a group of pastors with incredibly long tenures, 30 or 40 or even 50 years of serving churches (yes, we have one pastor who has been serving churches for 55 years); I was a bit intimidated, but recognized the need, and agreed to try.

That's when I received an email from one of our conference staff - labeled "CONFIDENTIAL" - that's almost never a good thing. Upon opening the email, there were details about the Longevity Circuit, a list of people to invite, suggestions for topics and conversations, and advice for group frequency and yearly flow. But then, at the end of the email, there was what required the

"CONFIDENTIALITY" note. The email read, "You will see pastor _____ is on your list to invite. Please be aware that this pastor has in the past dominated all conversations and group discussions with his own agenda and concerns; he has been spoken to about this by his District Superintendent, and has stated his desire to do better, but we wanted to make you aware of his tendency."

WOW! A pastor who likes to talk a lot.....how unusual!.....OK, if you know me, I'm like that some as well! Perhaps we all are.....Sometimes our mouths runneth over.....but to have a caution like this from a member of the Conference staff is something unusual. It would seem that there was something egregious going on here, where a pastor dominates the discussion so regularly, so completely, so thoroughly that they needed to warn me in advance about him.....as if this pastor couldn't help but talk about his worries, his struggles, his achievements, his past, his present.....as if he couldn't get himself out of the way of the purpose of the group, which was to share in fellowship and support of each other.

"It was as if he couldn't get himself out of the way"this phrase seems to hit home the issue Jesus was addressing in our scripture passage from Mark. The passage starts by his message about people who seem to strive to be the center of attention: "³⁸As Jesus taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets;" and Jesus goes on later to observe that many who contribute to charity do so with fanfare and pomp, so as to be seen - again, to draw attention to themselves through their acts of donating significant financial gifts. They can't seem to get themselves out of the way.

But then, Jesus observes something that others would easily miss in the midst of such fanfare; a lowly widow, poor and quietly humble, putting in a shamefully small amount relative to the abundances of the others - yet, hers was by far the greater gift. It was not a gift seeking to place herself as the center of attention, but in response to God's call to share. Share out of what we have. Share for the purposes of helping others. Share for the sake of God's pull on humanity, the pull of love for all, especially the marginalized and needy. And her gift was greater than the others, simply for the fact that she shared all she had.

In other words, this lowly, poor widow got herself out of the way, whereas the others put themselves in the way. In the way of what, you ask? IN THE WAY OF GOD'S WILL; IN THE WAY OF GOD'S INTENTION FOR US ALL; THAT WE

SEE OURSELVES AS PART OF GOD'S FAMILY FIRST, THAT NONE GO WITHOUT, THAT OUR ABUNDANCES MAY MEET OTHER'S NEEDS, AND THAT IT IS ALWAYS MORE ABOUT GOD THAN IT IS ABOUT US. If it is about us first, God gets secondary status, and is likely to get passed over; but if it is about God first, God establishes our primary status as his beloved - individually and corporately, together - and no one gets passed over.

This past week, I received some very sad news. I was informed by Patsy Hodges that a mutual friend of ours, Rev. Charles Schuster, had passed away after a short illness. "Chuck" as he was known, was my home church pastor when I was considering my call to ministry; he wound up being my supervising pastor as I began my candidacy, and followed with interest my progress through seminary and as I came before the Board of Ordained Ministry many years ago. He was someone I respected greatly; his death will leave a great absence felt by many in our conference community.

I lift him up not only as my heart recognizes that we are in the proximity of All Saint's remembrances, but also because Charles had a wonderful sort of balance about himself that I find rather rare. Chuck had an understanding of the place of not only pastors in ministry but people of faith generally which resonates strongly with the counsel of Jesus. I recall reading in the Fort Collins newspaper an interview with Charles regarding the practice of being a pastor. With his usual wit and insight, he made the following comment: "Well, being a pastor is kind of like this. You spend a week trying to craft a good sermon, and upon reading the final draft on Saturday night, you think to yourself, "this is too good for them! Pearls of profound wisdom...." Then, you deliver the sermon the next morning, and based upon the reaction of the parishioners afterwards, you spend the afternoon looking for a new job!"

He was talking about how hard it is to get ourselves out of the way - to treat the message as an opportunity to shine light on God, and not ourselves; to shine a light upon God that will shine back the only light worthy to see by, to see ourselves in, to see the world around us by, to see others by. I think Charles got this message; I think Jesus was identifying in the widow another person who understood. It is said that it is how we see things that determines what we live for. Jesus entertains the thought that what we live for determines how we see things. Or more precisely - it is who we live for that determines how we see things.