

Widows and Windows

As we meet up with Jesus again this morning, the Temple leaders continue to quiz him and play games in their effort to trap him and trip him up. It is the same day. They have not changed locations, which is oddly fitting since most of us have not radically changed locations this week either. Except we have. We may be behind closed doors, but we are not where we were last week. We have learned how to stay put when we are accustomed to being on the go. We have begun to realize all that is at stake as the virus invades homes and lives while superhero nurses, doctors, techs, and aides do everything they can to save everyone they can. We have developed new skills and tried new things. We have discovered a hunger we did not know we had, a longing to see familiar faces and hear our favorite voices. And we are eager to be seen and heard, too, so we have learned how to use Facebook live, Zoom, FaceTime, and even TikTok in some cases with the help of children and grandchildren, or maybe a neighbor down the street. Some of us have even gone old-school and placed a few phone calls, all so we can hear the voice of another. So with the help of these new ways of hearing and seeing, let us listen together to what God is saying to us from Mark 12, beginning with verse 28. [Read Mark 12:28-34]

Jesus and the disciples are on their way out of the Temple. They have been there for what feels like a very long, very tense Tuesday. But before they leave, there are other leaders who want to question Jesus, including a legal expert, also known as a scribe. He could easily be lumped in with the others who oppose all that Jesus is up to, but this one surprises us by praising Jesus' answers. He asks Jesus what the highest, most important commandment is, and Jesus responds with familiar words:

The most important one is ... Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, You will love your neighbor as yourself. No other commandment is greater than these.¹

These words are nothing new. Jesus is quoting texts from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. Other religious leaders of Jesus' day urge the same kind of faithfulness. Love God. Love neighbor. It is that simple and that

¹ Mark 12:30-31, CEB

complicated, because it is not an “either or” decision. The two go together. You can’t have one without the other. The scribe wholeheartedly agrees. Jesus tells the scribe that he is not far from God’s kingdom. Mark tells us that the questions end at that point. The one everyone wanted to stump has instead stumped them. So the questions end, but Jesus has more to say, more to teach. [Mark 12:38-44]

I wonder how that scribe feels now. I don’t think I have noticed before how closely Jesus connects the scribes and the widow. Right on the heels of telling the one scribe that he is close to the kingdom, Jesus then points out just how far away he really is. It seems that the scribe, the expert is just a little too enamored with the *idea* of loving God and neighbor, and less faithful about putting that belief into action. It makes me wonder how much time this leader and others actually look up and out to see who is in need, to notice which neighbors might actually be longing to be loved by those who hold all the cards, all the power.

I have heard multiple sermons on the widow and her faithfulness, but scholars point out that in many ways Jesus is more concerned to critique the Temple leadership, to call out the corruption and hypocrisy of the powerful and the privileged than to celebrate the widow’s sacrifice. That said, I’m intrigued by the widow. She likely knows isolation on a level many of us have not until recently. She has no influence, no connection. I imagine that hearing familiar words or voices is part of what draws her to the Temple. Yes, she has come to put in her meager contribution, but I suspect going to the Temple is about more than dropping off her offering. This is the place she has always expected to feel closer to God and God’s people. She knows that God is not confined to any one building, but somehow in coming here, she senses God’s presence in a way she doesn’t in other places. We know how she feels, don’t we? We associate this sanctuary or others with a nearness to God, a heightened awareness of God’s presence, which is why it can be so hard not to be worshiping together physically in this space for a while.

One of the best things I have seen in the past few weeks is a short clip of a quarantined dark street in Sienna, Italy.² One person opens his window and begins to sing a familiar folk tune, and very quickly, other

² <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/coronavirus-italy-siena-song-canto-della-verbena-video-lockdown-a9399176.html>

windows open and more voices join in. The lighting does not change, and yet the street does not seem as dark as it first did when the video began.

It is strange to be here without you. I'm guessing some of you have seen the story of the church in Italy where the priest taped photos of his parishioners to the pews.³ I could do that, but it would not be the same, because you are not simply a flat photo. No you are church, living, breathing church unconfined by any walls. And I am so very grateful for the ways you are being church outside these walls. Because I do not think we're scribes. I do not think we limit our faithfulness to this place or this hour each week. I do not think we are overly caught up in how much we know about God or how much we can parade our faithfulness in front of one another in here. And if we are, this season gives us a chance to do better, be better. The Temple leadership rightfully comes under fire for its refusal to follow the greatest commandment, for its hypocrisy in taking a widow's last two cents without a care for her struggles every other day of the week. But the widow is not simply a flat photo to be pitied. No, I am convinced that she carries the love of God with her out into a world that gives her little notice at all. Her meager two cents is her open window in a way, her way of giving what she has out of thanksgiving for the God who has given her life. She is only allowed to go so far within the Temple walls. She does not have the run of the place like many of the leaders do, and yet she embodies faithfulness in a way they do not. She carries her faithfulness with her out into the world. Honestly, I think maybe the leaders would do well to get out more. Yes, they move freely about Jerusalem, even under the eye of the Romans, but I'm not sure how often they open their windows, so to speak. Even the scribe who seems eager to "get" Jesus falls short. Faithfulness is not simply about being an expert in all things religious or about knowing the right answers; faithfulness is about living those answers the best we can, embodying love of God and love of neighbor with everything in our being. It means looking up from the page or the screen, getting outside the confines of our comfort zone; it means giving what we can to care for neighbors, strangers, and friends; it means opening a window and adding our voices to others.

³ <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-europe/2020/03/as-coronavirus-empties-churches-italian-priest-fills-pews-with-photos-of-parishioners/>

The widow knows that her two cents will not make or break the Temple budget or buy her any special influence or favors. That is not why she gives. She gives because she is answering the ancient and abiding call to love God with all that she is and all that she has and to love her neighbors as herself—body, soul, mind, strength, and voice, too. Her two cent offering serves—or is supposed to serve—other widows, orphans, and strangers who have even less than she does. Her gift opens a window and links her lone voice to the chorus of a larger community.

One substantial piece that is missing from our worship online is our singing together. Thanks to Andy, this morning we can hear the right notes and enjoy his voice, but this morning's music is not intended to be a solo performance. The lyrics and the music are printed in your bulletin for a reason. The hope is that we will sing together in our homes and neighborhoods. I've joked that I will be lip syncing while Andy plays and sings, but I think that falls short of what we are called to do. The closing hymn, "Come Thou Fount" is one of my favorites, but this morning, its lyrics ring true in a way they have not before: "Tune my heart to sing thy grace; streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise." Songs of loudest praise sung from living rooms in pjs, from retirement communities with a few friends around a breakfast table, from apartment balconies, and maybe even from the inside of a car or two—that is what we can offer the world. Yes, we need to keep our physical distance. That is one way we love our neighbor, but that does not mean we keep our spiritual, social, or even musical distance. We can open our windows in a way and lend our voices—loud ones, soft ones, young ones, old ones, operatic and completely off-key two-cent ones—to the love song the world needs to hear and trust right now. Because God is faithful, and on our best days the church reveals that belief to be true, not only in what we say in here but in how we live out there. We show it in how we treat our neighbor, welcome the stranger, care for the widow and the orphan, and offer songs of loudest praise with every fiber of our being. That is the love Christ reveals for us and for everyone in his ministry and on the cross, after all. He gives his all, even when some think his all is not worth two cents. He gives his all, and it is everything.

So open a window and sing, dear friends; a frightened and hurting world is waiting. And as we sing, I hope we listen as well. We just might hear the song our hearts need, too.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.