

The Rev. Steve Best
St. Thomas Church
Pent. 24B; 11.11.18
Kings 17:8-16; Heb.
9:24-28; Mk.12:38-44

A Sacrifice Worth Making

“Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God.” These are familiar words to us. Each Sunday we hear them at the offertory in preparation for our communion with God whose very nature and love is revealed to us through sacrifice. Much more than a stop sign to let us know that the announcements have gone on too long, if we are not careful we will miss their significance. These holy words of the apostle Paul, “Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, and offering and sacrifice to God” are an open invitation to participate in something much larger than ourselves. They invite us to find a life worth living and a sacrifice worth making.

This morning’s Gospel story helps widen and deepen our hearts to receive this invitation. The lesson is two complementary stories linked together through how widows are viewed and treated. The stories contrast the pride and greed of the religious leaders known as scribes with the humility and generosity of an impoverished woman who is willing to give all.

In an ancient and patriarchal society in which women had few legal rights or protections this widow is the quintessential representation of vulnerability. The two copper coins released from her hands may not sound like much, but it was the cost of a modest meal in her society and it was all she had. She had given away her last supper. By contrast, the scribes held not only religious authority but legal authority as well. Because they were among the very few in their society that could read, write, and draw up legal contracts such as wills and business transactions, they were the quintessential representation of privilege, wealth, and power.

Whenever I happen to meet scribes in the scriptures, I cower a little, as I look down and note the length of my own long and flowing robe. Additionally, I have been told by our daughter that my prayers are too long. Is it possible I have become one of them?!

It is very important to note where this two-part story lands in Mark's gospel. Jesus has entered Jerusalem in preparation for the events that will lead to his eventual arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection. He has just overturned the tables of the money changers at the temple in his outrage at how religion was being used to oppress the most vulnerable in his society. As important as the social justice message is, first and foremost Jesus is preparing his disciples to understand the sacrifice he is about to make and illumine his bedrock teaching, "There is no greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

While acknowledging the powers to be, religious or secular, and the role they play in our institutions, Jesus tells us to watch for the one who sacrifices. The root meaning of sacrifice is "to make holy." God wants us to be made holy by offering up our gifts of time, talent, and financial resources for the sake of doing something good for the entire community—not just for ourselves. This is the community that is holy. This is the people God admires.

We live in a world full of sacrifice. Today we remember our veterans and their families, some of whom have made the ultimate sacrifice of losing their lives in the hopes that the ideals of our country—liberty, freedom, equality and prosperity for all—might be protected and realized. Today we remember the victims of the Thousand Oaks shooting, the troubled veteran who committed the violence, and the courageous veteran and law enforcement officer who sacrificed their lives so that others might be saved. Today we remember the recent national, state and local elections, that we live in a deeply divided country, and that each of us will need to make sacrifices and larger investments of time, energy, and financial resources to bring about healing and wholeness across our land.

When you think about it, aren't we all in some kind of a battle zone? Where is your front line? My front line is to be found in the battle between complacency and taking courageous action, between despairing and searching for hope, between generous giving and fearful withholding. In this season of stewardship, we encounter the call to discover for ourselves how great challenges met with great faith can create great strength and vibrant communities.

We are called to form a deeper relationship with a loving God whose very nature is sacrificial and who sent his only Son into the battlefield of our broken world to bring victory through love. God is faithful and always points us to a life worth living and a sacrifice worth making.

The undecorated and unsung hero of today's gospel story has found a life worth living and a sacrifice worth making. This widow of courage, despite all odds, is a woman who demonstrates a resilient faith during overwhelming circumstances and a battle for survival. This unnamed woman of courage moves out of the safety of anonymity into the full view of an unadorned and unpretentious Rabbi who points to her as one worthy of imitation.

Jesus knew that she, and so many like her, perhaps even us too, stand on the front line between a true religion that produces "faith, hope, and love for all people" and a false religion that creates "faith, hope and love" for only a privileged few. This is called out in the letter of James, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." Each year, we pledge our time, energy, and financial resources in order to remember our truest and deepest calling. We pledge to remember our full participation in the sacrificial love of Christ.

In a world that is full of streaming images of celebrities, over paid movie stars, athletes and entertainers, God, in this beautiful gospel story tells us who, where and what to watch for. I find it nothing other than inspiring that Jesus, a veteran of a spiritual battle between true religion and false religion, tells his disciples and he tells us who to watch and pay attention to so that we might find a life worth living, a sacrifice worth making, and a peace that surpasses human understanding. And so, my brothers and sisters, "Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God." Amen.