



A Different Kind of Patriotism

SCRIPTURE:
Mark 12:1-44

July 4, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

It won't be long now, as Jesus has already entered Jerusalem. The songs of Hosannah have faded. The last supper is being planned. His crucifixion is just hours away. Jesus uses these last moments to teach. He would often teach about what was right in front of him and what was right in front of him was the temple and the teachers there. Jesus didn't think much of them. He had less than kind things to say about religious leaders—I didn't read that part today. We skipped over that. After critiquing the religious leaders, he pauses near the treasury and watches folks give offerings. There were some folks who were loaded and were very generous.

But Jesus' attention is drawn not to them but to a woman whom we are told was a widow. She makes a gift to the temple. It wasn't much. It was one of those gifts that had a bigger impact on the woman than it did on the temple, at least in financial terms, for it was just two lepta. They were the smallest Greek copper coins. Not much value, but Jesus said it was all she had to live on and she put it all in the offering plate.

Jesus makes sure that his disciples see her. Look: That woman. Did you see that?

Some modern interpreters believe that the tone in Jesus' voice is one of lament—even anger. What we are witnessing is an injustice. As one student of the text stated, “her contribution was totally misguided, thanks to the encouragement of official religion, [but not only that] it was also a waste.”¹

Why would her generosity be misguided or a waste? Well, they say ‘misguided’ because just a few

verses before (the part I skipped over), Jesus says, “Beware of scribes who seek the best seats in the synagogue and banquets, and who say long prayers... for they devour widows' houses.”²

Jesus condemns the scribes because they are corrupt. They use their religious power to dehumanize the weaker members of society. It's dishonorable. It is like the people today who send in their Social Security checks to TV preachers who promise their generosity will bless them, but the preachers use these gifts to buy private planes and \$5,000 suits. It's wrong.

There is no doubt that the temple was corrupt. Jesus says so himself. Some say to support a corrupt institution is misguided. Some say it is also a waste. Because in the very next chapter, Jesus says the temple won't last. It will be destroyed. Not one stone will be left on another.³ Jesus was right about that. The Romans would destroy the temple. This woman gave her gift to a temple that had no future. Many readers of the gospel are convinced that Jesus looks at this woman and it breaks his heart because of the injustice of it all.

But I'm not so sure. I'm not arguing that the temple wasn't corrupt. It was. It's an institution and no institution is pure. Institutions, after all, are just groups of people and people aren't pure. All have their failings. Perfection in our institutions is not an option. Jesus could not abide injustice but this is also true with Jesus: None of us are defined by our failings and flaws alone.

A friend of mine called my attention to an article written by Colson Whitehead called, “The Loser Edit

1 Placher, William C. *Mark*. (2010) p. 182. Placher is citing an article by Addison Wright.

2 Mark 12:38-40

3 Mark 13:1-2

That Awaits Us All.”⁴ Whitehead reflected on those reality-TV shows where someone gets booted off the cooking show because her muffin was dry or you get kicked off the island because you couldn’t swing across the river on that vine. Whitehead says what makes these shows work is that the viewer starts developing his or her own sense of who is getting booted ‘off the island.’ We figure out who’s not worthy. So, when Samantha gets the heave-ho, we say, “I knew that. I saw it coming. I’m pretty good at judging these guys. You could tell Ramone was too nervous to pull off that demi-glace.” Whitehead said these shows work because across the hour of the show, a narrative of frailties, self-centered actions and peccadillos emerge. He calls it, “The Loser Edit.” The Loser Edit brings into focus the weaknesses and failings of a contestant so that when they get shipped off, we think, “He had it coming. Those weaknesses should be punished.”

There’s a Winner Edit, too, of course. The Winner Edit pulls into focus the moments of heroism and victory—all to justify those on top. This is not new.

When TV programs first began, the good guys would wear white hats and the bad guys wore black hats. This way we wouldn’t get confused about the status of people’s souls; we could just see what color hat they wore. It’s a bit more sophisticated now but the plot is the same. You don’t get booted off the cooking show because your muffin is dry; it’s because you aren’t worthy. As Whitehead says, “Your bad fortune is justice because you are bad.”

Sometimes I wonder if we apply these edits to America and to other Americans. There are a lot of folks who define themselves as patriots—who define other people who are clearly American as being un-American. How can one love one’s country if you don’t love the people of your country? Oh, we all see the failings of folks who see things differently than we do and we are right. We can always see failings because no one is pure. We have our own Loser Edit of them. The problem with the Loser Edit is that, it’s just an edit—an edited version of the story.

In our text this morning, the scribes are corrupt. They take advantage of this widow who should have

been the recipient of their generosity but instead, she gives her last dime to the temple. Shame on them for being so self-centered that they care more for her gift than for her! The temple should come down. That’s what many modern scholars affirm. But I’m not so sure.

If I understand the text, I’m not sure Jesus is brokenhearted when he points out this woman. Don’t get me wrong; Jesus could not abide injustice. But I wonder if he might see something else in this moment. Something that inspires him. I think he looks at her and sees a bit of himself.

Here’s what I mean: She looks at the temple and sees an institution that she believes in—that she’s committed to—even with its flaws. She knows the leadership is compromised and stands on clay feet but she gives her life for it, not because it’s perfect but because she loves it.

She gives all she has to a corrupt institution. Jesus does exactly the same thing. He gives his life for a corrupt world because that is what love does. They are the same; she just did it first.

Jesus knows the world is a mess. Jesus knows the world is not worthy of his sacrifice. And with that knowledge, he gives himself for us and for all—not because we are perfect, but because he loves. Oh, some might say his sacrifice was misguided and others might say it was a waste of his life. But maybe, he shows us how to lean into our better angels for a flawed world.

I said in my eNote on Friday that this passage informs my patriotism. I think that those who really love America sacrifice for her. We honor soldiers who sacrifice for the nation, but what about the rest of us? Sacrifice, as a form of love, cannot be outsourced. I think Christian faith is about the common good. It’s fine to wave the flag. It’s fine to have a parade. But patriotism means loving the neighbor and serving the community. I think a faith-informed patriotism means sacrificing for the common good.

This week, as we have watched rescue workers strive to find life in the midst of the rubble of a collapsed building in Florida, I was reminded of the White Helmets in Syria who do the same work in

4 I am grateful to Rev. Scott Black Johnston, pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York, for sharing this article, found in the New York Times Magazine on March 8, 2015.

the midst of warfare. In particular, I remember how they pulled a little boy from the rubble. His name is Omran Daqneesh. His home in Aleppo, Syria was bombed. Rescue workers retrieved him from the rubble and rushed him to an ambulance. I remember being heartbroken by his circumstance.

But there was another child who became my teacher. His name is Alex. He wrote a letter to President Obama, who was president at the time. He wrote, “Remember the boy who was picked up by the ambulance in Syria? Can you please go get him and bring him to my home? Park in the driveway or on the street and we will be waiting for you guys with flags, flowers and balloons. We will give him a family and he will be our brother. In my school, I have a friend from Syria, Omar, and I will introduce him to Omar. We can all play together. We can invite him to birthday parties and he will teach us another language. We can teach him English, too, just like my friend Aoto from Japan. Since he won’t bring toys and doesn’t have toys, Catherine will share her big blue stripy white bunny. And I will share my bike and I will teach him how to ride it. I will teach him additions and subtractions in math.”

That’s patriotism. It is seeing the human in another and sacrificing for the common good—not because they are perfect—but because that’s what love does. And I see it in you all the time.

We live in a world where corruption is all around us and in us all. But there is a bit of Jesus in us as

well. I see it in those of you who work at the Food Pantry. You don’t require the clients to be pure; you just insist they shouldn’t be hungry.

I see it in our Social Witness and Advocacy task force, who have had the courage to ask: How can we be less racist as a society?

I see it in Charlotte Davison and others who work every day to call attention to the gun violence that is destroying our nation and our city.

I see it in those of you who take a week of vacation to travel with our youth on a mission trip.

I see it in you who contributed extra money to build the Meneilly Center in a LEED-consistent manner (to minimize the environmental impact) and to cover the roof with solar panels. Everyone who loves someone in the next generation thanks you.

I could go on but you get my point. We live in a nation, like every nation, that needs saving. And like most nations, ours has little idea that she needs saving. So, she needs a people who are committed to living for the common good.

You do not sacrifice for the common good because the nation is pure—for America is surely not. You do it because you love America. And when you love like that, I think Jesus sees a bit of himself in you.

And I wonder, if just like he did all those years ago at the temple treasury, maybe Jesus calls his disciples together in heaven and says, “Look there, at Village Church. Do you see them? They look a bit like me. Did you see that?”