

November 11, 2018 Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost
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Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas

GOSPEL

Mark 12:38-44

The holy gospel according to Saint Mark, the twelfth chapter.
Glory to you, O Lord.

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! 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.”

The gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.

This past April, I was fortunate to be part of a group of colleagues that took a pilgrimage to Washington, D.C.

While we were there, we met amazing leaders and theologians...One of them was the pastor of Metropolitan AME Church, Reverend Bill Lamar. His church has a legacy that is hard to understate. This church is the oldest piece of real estate continuously owned by African American people in Washington D.C....the second oldest in the country. This church is where Frederick Douglas worshipped...It is where Rosa Parks’ D.C. memorial service was held. In his denomination, pastors are given assignments to serve particular congregations. And when he was brought in and told that he would become the pastor at this congregation, he said, “I feel like you’ve just strapped 250 years of history to my back.” And the bishop across the table said, basically, “We have.”

There was no denying the burden.

This week...we come to this place in the midst of the aftermath of a contentious election...after another mass shooting in California before we’ve had any time to recover from the shock of the one before it...

This week...we come to this place in the midst of our own lives...and the burdens that don't make the evening news...but that measure out our days...

This week we have also come to 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht...the Night of Broken Glass...that marked the opening of perhaps the most horrific chapter of human history that we call the Holocaust or Shoah.

And today, November 11, is called Veterans' Day in the United States...though it is also observed more broadly throughout the world as Armistice Day...On this day, 100 years ago at 11:11 we commemorate the armistice between the Allied powers of World War I and Germany.

100 years ago – a great peace was realized after great sacrifice and suffering. 20 years later – a new era of great suffering dawned. And today – we still live in between fragile peace and fresh pain.

There is no denying the burden. History is always strapped to our backs...even if time goes by when we don't pay very much attention to it.

In Mark's gospel today, history and present suffering collide outside the temple treasury. We read this story so often with a narrow frame of view. We see Jesus, who sees the widow, and who names her generosity...and also the truth of her poverty.

But what do we see when we look wider...to the history and the world surrounding this poor, generous woman?

The people of God have been gifted a law...a law that protects the people from harm...not just spiritual harm...but physical and social harm. God has given the people a law to shape their lives together...and in relationship to the peoples around them.

The vulnerable are to be offered care – foreigners, orphans and widows. People are to honor God and one another as the Ten Commandments teach. People are to let love guide their life.

This widow outside the treasury...is in the holy city of the people who were freed from slavery, given the law as they wandered in the wilderness, who were granted the land in which they now live.

But, this widow is an embodiment of much more than generosity. She is an embodiment of an indictment of the People of God. Because if the People of God were being who they are

called to be...this woman would not have less than a dollar to her name. The rich walk past and put in their large sums...but seem not to see her...The scribes devour widow houses, Jesus says, even as they say self-righteous prayers.

If only they thought more of the history that is strapped to their backs. The history of slavery, of searching, of homelessness, of God's great gifts...of the law calling us all to care for one another...maybe they would see her.

Maybe they wouldn't prefer to enjoy their material comfort, to ignore the parts of their story that call them into discomfort or risk.

These verses from Mark are a favorite stewardship text. But I don't think it is the kind of stewardship text we think it is. It is certainly about stewardship. But I believe that it is *not* about learning that even when we have very little, we should still give something away.

If this is a stewardship text, it is meant to show us that God doesn't want us to give away our last dollar...last hope...last piece of comfort or security.

God wants us to make sure no one else ever has to.

But to do that, we will have to be willing to really see the world around us...even when we know it will call us beyond ourselves. We have to know the history that is strapped to our backs. We will have to face our burdens.

Another of our teachers on that trip in Washington D.C. was Reverend Brad Braxton, who is currently the Director of the Center for the Study of African American Religious Life and the Supervisory Curator of Religion at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. (How's that for a mouthful?) He is a student, teacher, preacher, and activist who curates the stories of African American religious life and history in the United States. He spoke to us about burdens, too. It is hard not to feel burdened when visiting the Museum of African American History and Culture. And Dr. Braxton spoke about what it was like to be responsible for that burden...for the lives cut short...the stories that he doesn't want to just leave in a museum.

He told a story about being out one day as a child...on a dirt road in the family's station wagon...how they got the car firmly sunk into a mud hole in the middle of nowhere. After a great deal of fruitless pushing...and a lot of whining from the kids...his father told them all to get out and sit in the back of the station wagon...They huddled there...like it was a little fort...I don't know if anyone here played in the hatch back of a station wagon when they were a kid...but I can imagine how they played and passed the time...like they were in a magic cave...or dungeon...waiting to be rescued...In the mean time...their father was back in the driver's seat...slowly trying to rock the car back and forth...and finally...they

jerked up and out of the hole. They hadn't known what he was doing...but he put them in the back of the car to use their weight to create traction. The extra weight...the burden...when it was in the right place...helped them get unstuck.

Pretending our burdens aren't strapped to our backs probably won't help... even if we can get away with pretending life is easier and simpler for awhile.

And sometimes, when we acknowledge them...they will just be heavy and hard. Another shooting. Too much hate. Seemingly endless descents into war after precarious periods of peace. Exhaustion. Tragedy.

It's okay to sit down and rest from the work of carrying these burdens. It's ok to come undone sometimes. They are heavy and hard.

But then... sometimes...sometimes the weight of them will be the traction we need to truly move the world.

This is what Jesus does for us so completely...even as we try to continue to embody this gospel in our own lives. He enters our human life with an open heart to see all our suffering...with a mind that holds the honest knowledge of our troubled story...and he is so moved with love for us. He is so moved with love that he takes the largest burden in the world...all our suffering and pain...and he straps it to his back, and he bears the cross...and makes it into the fulcrum that shifts the cosmos.

This is a heavy time. It is. The burdens of this world are true and towering and tiring. And, we bear them as open-heartedly as we know how. Because when we see this world as it really is we are called together, to love for one another...and to the trust in our God who is still transforming us and the world in love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.