

B Lectionary 32 11.11.18
1 Kings 17:8-16; Mark 12:38-44
Focus Statement: Jesus supports us.

So, you may have heard we voted on some stuff this week, both as a congregation and as a nation. Last Sunday we voted to adopt a new vision statement and core values, and on submitting those core values to Reconciling Works to be listed as a congregation who is welcoming to LGBTQ folk. Both things passed, which was super exciting. You can read the new core values, and share them with your friends, on the website. And if you go to the Reconciling in Christ website, you can search for us! And then on Tuesday, we as a nation had an election, where we voted on a bunch of people and stuff. And some people won, and some didn't. And some stuff passed, and some didn't. Actually, in Michigan all the stuff passed, but in some other states some stuff didn't.

And for the last month I've been saying, this is super important, make sure you get out and vote. And for the last, geez, at least a year, I've been badgering the council and the Redevelopment Team, come on, we've got to get this vision statement and these core values done, and we've got to get everyone's input on it, and let everyone vote on it, it's super important. And now we've done all that and, guess what, none of it really matters. Wittmer or Schuette, Bizon or Noble, Prop one, Prop two, whoever you voted for, whether you were for or against any of the propositions, whatever circle you personally filled in on Tuesday, I don't care. Today is neither the day for dancing in the streets nor for casting your hands up in despair. A bunch of people were elected on Tuesday. People who will do some good things and some bad things. Who will make some decisions you'll like, and some you'll hate. Even a stopped clock is right twice, I can just about guarantee that no matter how

elated you may be with a victor, they will not make every single decision you would want. And no matter how incredibly, horribly awful you think the new office holder is, they will do something that you will agree with. Neither Jesus nor Satan was elected on Tuesday, just a whole bunch of people. Some of whom we liked, some we didn't, but that's all they are. People, just like you and I.

Now, don't get me wrong, I do think elections matter. But I push the point about elections being about people because I think we have a tendency to forget that these are people we elected, not saviors. It's important to remember that because when we forget, when we raise them to the level of hero or villain, then we can blame them and distance ourselves, when things don't go as we want.

What got me thinking about this was our Gospel reading for this morning, and specifically how many sermons I've heard and, I admit, preached, on the widow and her two copper coins. How selfless and generous she was, how strong her faith must have been, to give everything she had, the Greek literally translates "her whole life," to God. She is so often raised up as a model of true generosity and faithfulness, oh that we could be more like the widow and give all that we have, everything that we are, to God.

But we won't follow in the model of the widow and give everything we have. Or, at least, I won't. I'll give up a lot for God, and I try to be generous, but I also know the value of solid financial planning, and maybe it's a sign of my lack of faith, but I know how compound interest works and it feels important to save for retirement. The bar the widow sets for us

is so high as to be unrealistic. And since it's impossible, rather than be a useful model, she becomes an excuse. Since I cannot give everything I have and trust completely in God like the widow, then why try. I'm going to fall short anyway, so does it really matter what I do with my money?

Not only is the widow's example impractical, quite frankly it also feels unethical. As your pastor, let me be clear. I want you to give generously to the church and its mission. I want you to practice good stewardship of your resources. I want you to have faith, to take risks in your generosity, and to trust that God will provide. But I do not want you beggar yourself for the church. I won't ask it of you. So what's really going on here?

As popular and well known as the second half of this reading is, those wise souls who created the lectionary gave us the part before, the warning about the scribes. And while I joke about the lectionary and my disagreements with it a lot, I think they really nailed the division this week. Because I think we cannot understand Jesus' words about the widow unless we understand what he first said about the scribes.

"As 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, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!" And here's the important verse, the verse that links this section to the next, "They devour widows houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." They devour widows houses. And then a story about a widow, house destroyed, giving her last two

copper coins to the institution that pays the scribes. I got to thinking as I read this, what if rather than lifting up the widow as a model, Jesus pointed her out as a proof of his condemnation of scribes, and of the religious system that taught this woman that the way not just to her salvation, but to her very survival, was to give literally everything she had to an institution that had already failed in its responsibility to her so fully as to leave her with only two copper coins to begin with, and then to ask those coins of her. I wonder if rather than “be like the widow,” the real challenge Jesus presented to his followers was “don’t be like the scribes.” Don’t create a religious system where those who have little give everything, in the blind hope of having something; while those with a lot, like the rich man feel like they have too much to lose. I wonder if Jesus lifted up the widow not as a model of generosity, but as an example of how the people of God had failed to live up to the obligation given by Moses in Exodus, to “not abuse any widow or orphan... [for] when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry.”

And if the fate of this widow, giving her last two coins to an institution who did not care for her, shows us what it looks like when the church fails its people, the Old Testament reading about Elijah and the widow of Zarephath is the hope, is what it looks like when we as the people of God are at our best. Unlike the woman putting her two copper coins in the treasury, Elijah asked the woman to share what she had with him. He asked for a portion. And yes, a portion of her meager goods was a huge sacrifice, but it was still just a portion. And that portion, that sharing, sustained both of them until the drought was through. In the same vein as the miracle of the loaves and the fishes, God’s economy is a sharing economy, when each of us gives of what we have; trusting in another to do the same, there

is enough to go around. Giving everything we have isn't a relationship. It's a one-time transaction, when it's gone, it's gone. But to share, I have to know you, I have to know what you need, how much, and when, and you have to know the same things about me.

So I started this sermon by talking about the election. And we're going to get back to the there, but first let me tell you what got me thinking about this was part of the core values conversation at the October council meeting. So the council and the Redevelopment Team had been wordsmithing these things for months. And they were getting frustrated because we were talking about the same thing over and over again, and I was getting frustrated because I felt like I wasn't getting the feedback I needed to feel like these were values we all held and not just values that I thought sounded nice. So we were going back and forth about it, at my request, again, at the October meeting. And it was getting late, and I was pushing the point, and Teresa finally piped up and was like, "what is the point of this? No one is going to come into our church and ask to read our core values before they decide to join. Either they're going to like us, and like our mission, or they're not. No amount of fancy words are going to change that." And it was late, and I was tired, and I must confess I got a little annoyed at Teresa for saying that. After all, we'd been at this thing for months, and we were so close to the finish line, and couldn't she just give her input for one last council meeting so we could get this to a vote so we could get it before the congregation and be done with it! But I went home that night and I thought about it, and she was right. I was also right, the activity of crafting our core values, setting them to paper, voting on them, all of the time and effort we've put into this project lets us know what our values are and gives us a guide for how we are to live out our calling as the people of God in this place.

But Teresa was also right, because if all we do with these core values is vote on them, paste them on our website, and call it a day, they mean nothing. That we wrote them down doesn't matter, what matters is what we do with them. What matters is how we live them out. How we give love, how we show grace, how we practice inclusion, work for social justice, and put all these things into action. How we live them is what makes our core values matter.

The same is true for the election on Tuesday. It does matter that you voted, that you took the time to research candidates, consider the proposals, and made a decision. But if that's all you do. If now that you've filled in your row of circles, you call it a day and wash your hands of the whole thing until you're called upon to fill in a bunch of circles next time, then it really doesn't matter. What matters is what we do with the people who have now been elected, what matters is how we move forward. Because we elected a bunch of people who are neither Jesus nor Satan, and who will do some things we like, and some things we don't. So whether your guy or gal won or lost, and whether your proposition passed or failed, none of it matters unless we keep bringing all that we have to work for the widows and orphans of our society, those in need of support and care. And the promise in the Old Testament reading is that when we do that. When we get skin in the game, when we share what we have, money yes, but also our voices, our time, and our ideas, rather than leave it up to figureheads to either praise or blame, then there is not just enough, but abundance, to go around. The jar will not be emptied friends, and the jug will not fail, that is what God promises, so we have plenty to share. Amen.