

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

November 5, 2023

The Widow's Wisdom

Dr. Jo Forrest

The Widow's Wisdom

Dr. Jo Forrest

© 2023 by Dr. Jo Forrest and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: November 21, 2023

An apocalyptic tone infuses the Gospel of Mark. It was written during brutal punishment by the Romans against the Jewish community and as a shadow fell across the temple in Jerusalem, soon to be destroyed.

Against this fear, the writer predicts a new age will unfold through Christ Jesus. Mark's gospel begins with the promise "the good news" comes from him. In him we receive life, healing, and dignity for all.

This gospel presses with an urgent plea for readers to change their hearts and lives. To commit to his way.

Today's reading picks up after Jesus' triumphal arrival in Jerusalem. Each step he takes into the heart of the temple brings him closer to the authorities who examine his faith. Each time he speaks, Jesus teaches what it means to trust by pointing to those who live their beliefs.

Before I read, please pray with me.

Dear God, we too feel the world crumbling in places and wonder how our beliefs matter in the face of uncertainty. Settle us into a time of quiet with you and your holy word. With each breath, fill us with your spirit and the truth found only in you. Amen.

Mark 12:28-44, selected verses

²⁸ One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?”

²⁹ Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰ you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ ³¹ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

³² Then the scribe said to Jesus, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; ³³ and ‘to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

³⁴ When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

After that no one dared to ask him any question...

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 ³⁹ and to have the best seats in the synagogues and

places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰ They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

⁴¹ Jesus sat down opposite the treasury and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.

⁴³ Then Jesus 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. ⁴⁴ For 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."

In the very heart of religious activity, the temple, the writer of Mark surrounds Jesus with very different people. His conversations teach us as clearly today as two millennia ago.

The scribes commonly debated the Torah and its 613 commands. These scholars knew that debate leads to learning. It holds true today. When we wrestle with others in the spirit of learning, to

understand our scripture, God, and one another, we strengthen our individual and collective faith.

One scribe rises to test Jesus by asking; “of all these commands, which is greatest?” In other words, which of the 613 commands interprets all other commands.

Jesus placates this questioner by citing the Shema. It serves as the cornerstone to Israelite life, “love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.” To this iconic command from Deuteronomy, Jesus appends a relatively minor one from Leviticus, and “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Too bad we don’t have a narrator to let us know just how long these two men pause. I wish punctuation marks indicated how their respective tone of voice changed. Based upon what happens next, we can imagine the men share a smirk and raised eyebrows. These two agree, at least verbally, when the scribe professes following these two commands supersedes any of the other 611.

To ensure others hear their agreement, the scribe proclaims in the very place in which people parade their doves and goats, God’s desire for love rises above any burnt offerings or sacrifices.

In other words, don't let the little things consume your attention. Don't think ritual alone suffices. Don't get caught up measuring others as better or worse from displays of public piety. Simply love God and neighbor.

Jesus nods, maybe with a smile, as he tells the scribe that he is closer to the kingdom of God.

Just as their words evaporate in the air, Jesus turns their attention to a widow, someone likely excluded from debates and overlooked among the throng of wealthy worshipers. He lets her actions teach.

He asks them to notice her place "two small copper coins" in the treasury. She gives two *lepta*, the smallest coinage of that time. It took 64 such coins to make a denarius, a day's wage, that is, enough need to live each day.

Our translation of the Greek focuses on the economics claiming she gives "all she had to live on." That's one way to translate the Greek.

Another, perhaps more faithful translation connects her act to the great commands. Jesus says, she gave "her whole life." Jesus sees her put in her whole self. Even though that temple will crumble, she gives herself so the grand arc of faith will live on for those who love God and neighbor.

The gospel describes her as a widow, letting us know that she has stood at the lip of the grave at least once. If desperately poor, she stood in that sorrowful place maybe several times, burying not only a husband but likely one or more children. Life was so fragile in first century Palestine.

Once you've buried someone with whom you've shared your life, given and received love, you realize the point of life lies not in the keeping score or wealth or showy behavior. The widow's wisdom comes not from debates. She knows first-hand, your quality of life depends upon the love you share with one another.

This woman knows a love that does not die is the love that comes from God. If she gives generously of her coins, we imagine she gives everything she can in other ways to ensure God's promises endures.

Against all the wrangling in the temple between people, Jesus knows the widow gets it right somehow. Jesus is forever calling people to give their whole lives to God. It's central to his vision of discipleship. It's central to being close to the heart of God. He wants us to learn from this woman. Her act from long ago remains a teachable moment, a living parable. Jesus asks us to go and do likewise.

This story invites us to orient our living and giving to ensure what matters to God lives on in us.

On this All Saints' Day we remember the legacy of a woman from centuries ago and those beloved people in our lives whom we've laid to rest. I believe when we lay to rest someone we love or endure any event that rattles us to the core, we realize the gift given to us by God in Jesus.

Like the widow, in some way our saints bequeathed their faith to us. Not by being some stained-glass image of impeccable virtue, but by being mortal, fallible, faithful, and loving.

We carry the responsibility to uphold the legacy their collective faith.

How will we live in ways that tell this community and those that will follow afterward to love God and neighbor? Related to this, does what we do at Westminster matter to you? To your family? To this community?

When we come together as the body of Christ, whether inside this building or elsewhere, does our unity in him rise above any other devotion?

What happens when you lay before God, and one another, a common prayer for forgiveness and receive Christ's pardon?

Does the youth group, the mission trips, all the thoughtful reading of scripture we encourage in our children matter? The creative ways you teach with songs and stories and construction paper.

Will hosting honest conversations about Teen & Parent Mental Health make a difference in someone's life in this community?

Does the persistent work in hands-on mission to feed the hungry, provide security to the homeless, and tend the ill make a difference?

What about the ways we stand with the marginalized? Pray with and for the sick and for the world. Remember all those who quietly drop off covered dishes when someone comes home from the hospital. Celebrate the births and joys.

In the face of so much brokenness in our community and the violence in the world, can you imagine driving along Washington Road and not see our steeple rise? The cross adorning the top reflects the faith embodied in the work of the people. Perhaps our mere presence on this thoroughfare and all your work inspires nameless drivers to a higher goal.

Does Westminster tell the good news?

I think it does or I would not stand before you. I know it does when I hear your stories of faith holding you in the most vulnerable times. We know it does when this faith brings people together despite all the ways culture seeks to divide us.

When we all live the command to love God and neighbor, the rest of our priorities fall into place, and we make the community more loving and accepting.

Another and related question.

Do you know how much your gift of being present to one another matters?

Please know how much this community needs all of you, the young and vibrant, the old and wise, the wealthy, the struggling, the doubting, and the persistent. Each of you matters to God and to one another.

Jesus notices the widow's courage. He knows it takes quite a bit of courage for her to make her gift alongside the rich with their fistfuls of coins. And he saw her set aside any panic to cling to life – and live with hope.

From Mark's telling of the gospel, Jesus died four days after the events in this story. God raises him. Very likely, the widow died shortly thereafter as well. Her wisdom to give her best to God still inspires. God's love deserves our devotion for God remains devoted to us.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630
www.westminster-church.org