

A Tiny Thing

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Mark 12:38-44

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We've gone through a climactic storm this past week in the election of Nov. 5th. Voters have called for a sea-change to elevate a leader who has run on fear and resentment, and who will now transform our nation's landscape for years to come. Half of our nation is pleased, the other half alarmed about what is in store. The people have spoken, and now we will live with the consequences.

Thank God we live in a free country where we can express our views and vote our values. Our denomination, the United Church of Christ, believes in freedom of conscience and private judgment, respecting each person's choices and perspectives. We respect diversity of thought and politics, while also asking for us to love each other. That may be a stretch in our day that thrives on grievance and finger pointing. But for us love triumphs over division.

We don't know what may come, but what has been promised is a profound challenge to religious values that we hold dear. The Christian journalist, David French, wrote that our best response to the aftermath of current election is to protect the vulnerable and to speak the truth. We may need to stand up for those terrorized or neglected: poor, immigrants, LGBT friends and family, pregnant women, racial minorities, and more. The church can't do everything, but we can do what we can, as we have throughout the centuries. We can gather as a family of faith to speak the truth, not only about the state of the world, but about our faith; to uphold the truth behind our values of compassion, generosity, kindness, forgiveness. We can affirm the truth of whom we follow: Jesus Christ the shepherd who protects the flock from thieves and wolves, who welcomes outcasts, and offers the bread of life.

In our scripture this morning, Jesus speaks out against scribes, those religious lawyers, who studied laws of the Torah and who recited long prayers, but who did not honor the spirit of the Torah – the spirit of love and justice, of caring for widows and orphans, of giving aid to foreigners and strangers, showing care for the poor and respect to God's children. They flaunted their wealth and status, and 'devoured widow's houses.' Widows depended on their husbands or sons to protect them, and when these were gone, they were at the mercy of selfish lawyers who stole their homes out from under them.

Sounds a bit familiar, right? Private equity firms are buying up low income apartments and housing complexes and jacking up the rents; scam artists defraud older people out of their savings. We live in a nation that celebrates getting as much as possible, flaunting riches, and accumulating power. It feels as though this way of life won last Tuesday and the scribes are now firmly in power. Get what you can, look out for yourself, thumb your nose at others, step on those who get in your way. This is nothing new. It is how history has most often played out: the triumph of the powerful and wealthy over the poor or unlucky.

Jesus taught something quite different. In spite of the fact that his society was incredibly unjust and hard-hearted, he looked with compassion on those who were hurting, widow and orphans, beggars, the mentally ill, the disabled, the desperately poor, those whom his society rejected. The irony today is that those who claim the title of Christian are now some of the very ones bringing devastation down upon the most vulnerable – the unhealthy, the unhoused, the unemployed, the unprotected – like the widow in our story today. The phrase “for the sake of appearance” is translated from the Greek word *prophasis*, which carries a meaning of “pretending.” He calls his disciples to take notice of this pretense of the scribes whose ravenous greed is dressed up as religious piety. We see this pretense today in policies that will most likely be playing out in our society in the months and years ahead. Watch out for health care, climate justice, children’s services, women’s reproductive wellbeing, affordable housing, truth-telling. Widow’s houses will be devoured and more.

So, what can we do? How do we respond as people of faith – people who stand for values of compassion, justice, truth, and equality? Now that the storm has struck and will continue to rage, how do we shelter those whose lives have been or will be devastated?

In our scripture this morning we hear Jesus’ teaching that a tiny gift – less than a penny – given by a very poor widow, is worth more than hefty donations by those who are well off. Even though the gift is miniscule and she gives out of her poverty, her faith is enormously precious. In Greek the word used for the widow’s coins is *lepton*, which means “a tiny thing.” This *lepton* was the smallest coin, the smallest unit of money in circulation during that time and place. Not only is this woman a widow, but Jesus makes clear that she is “poor”. Mark’s widow is identified as *ptochoi*, she is the poorest of the poor.

What that teaches us is that our small gifts, when given authentically, in good faith, and with courage, add up. They are immensely valuable. They can transform the

world. An ancient Jewish fable speaks of grains of sand along the seashore battered by raging and chaotic waters of the storm-tossed ocean. "What can we do?" these individual sands said; 'how can we possibly contain the wild violence of this sea?' "We've got to band together," cried several grains. "We've got to gather at the shore!" "How is that possible?" some complained. "Just try!" So, the grains flew together, piling up along the beach, creating dunes and great stretches of sand that contained the vicious sea and kept it within bounds. Our small gifts pile up like sand that together contains chaos and hopelessness. Let's imagine this together – as our stewardship message this season reflects. Imagine small gifts if given from the heart and with faith that can create amazing change.

Rev. Michael Curry writes: *"God so loved the world that God "gave." God gave. God did not take. God gave. That's agape. That's love. And love such as that is the way to the heart of God, the heart of each other. It is the way to a new world that looks something more like God's dream for us and all creation."*

As we undergo this transformation of our nation's leadership this week, we could just give up, we could decide to stop working for good causes or to help the poor. Or we can do what little we can. We can give our gifts. We can drop in our two cents. We can contribute to organizations that offer food or medical care locally to food pantries and shelters, or to places like Gaza, Sudan, or Ukraine. We can volunteer to teach English to recent refugees or to help out at Mountainside hospital or in the schools. If we each in our own way strive to better our communities, we can create a new world. Jesus spoke of establishing the 'Kingdom of God' here on earth, to work little by little, day by day, to bring God's justice, God's love, God's forgiveness and open-hearted acceptance to this world, our own villages and society. Small coins add up. Tiny seeds, when planted, grow into towering trees.

One small gift we can foster in this time of change is that of prayer. It may seem a bit foolhardy to talk about prayer after an upheaval. But this may be the best time to pray, because prayer helps us to set a deeply held direction for our lives. It connects us to our inner selves and reminds us of our deepest values. Prayer is a tiny thing, like pennies thrown into a fountain. But tiny things add up and transform the world. If it is done regularly, day by day, it deepens and accumulates into a strong center of clarity and peace within. This fullness then radiates out to our families, our homes, our communities.

You may have seen an article last week in the NYT by Sara Sherbill entitled "*You Might Consider Praying.*" Wonderful article. Here is some advice that Ms. Sherbill offers when she writes: *What can we do when our hearts are breaking? When we are*

filled with stress and anxiety, when the sadnesses stack up, when hopelessness isn't an irrational response but a genuine reflection of daily reality? What can we do when we don't know what to do? We can pray.

What if we redefine prayer entirely? What if, when you are home, you simply sit in a chair and breathe, imagining you are worthy of what you pray for? Maybe that's peace in your heart, or the strength to act with courage even when you are terrified. Maybe you are asking for the clarity of mind to know which path to take next.

She tells a Jewish folk tale about a young orphan named Yussel who grew up in poverty and never learned to read. On the High Holy Days, he watches as the wealthy residents of his village attend synagogue in their finery. Unwelcome at synagogue because he cannot read, Yussel offers the only prayer he can, a simple tune on a reed pipe. During the concluding prayers of Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, the rabbi has a vision: The prayers of his congregants are not reaching the heavens. Their words are hollow, recited by rote while they are distracted by worldly concerns. It is only when a simple tune from a reed pipe plays that the gates are opened and the people's prayers flow through. It is Yussel's wordless prayer, offered from the heart, that opens the gates of heaven and lets the other prayers pass up to God.

Small gifts from the heart like coins from a poor widow can open a pathway to God. Perhaps in this time of upheaval we can pick up our own reed pipes and play from our hearts. We can offer tunes of kindness or care-giving, we can pipe melodies of love, of progress or resistance, songs of self-giving to our communities, our homes, our neighborhoods or church. Instead of falling into despair or dismay, we can throw in our copper coins with faith and bravery.

As you know, our church, is undergoing its annual stewardship campaign entitled **Imagine Together**. Let's imagine ways to strengthen this venerable church, a center of this town's moral vision and values. Let's imagine together ways it can widen its influence and vision to foster moral formation and spiritual guidance in a world that has become lost in selfishness and greed. Let's imagine together pathways of joy and hope for so many who have sunk into despair or addiction. Let's imagine together Jesus' way of love and justice – and work in our own small ways to shine light into a society stumbling in the dark. Thanks be to God. Amen.