

The Spirit of Justice

Psalm 127; Mark 12:38-44

As faithful followers of Christ, we are called to notice, to speak out, and to question injustice in the world. In our Robertson-Wesley anthem, we proclaim that we walk in the spirit of justice as we ask hard questions and defend those who need a voice.

So what does this mean? As a faithful community, our call to follow Jesus comes with really difficult choices where our intentions need to reflect our values. We're called to direct our lives toward right relationship with each other and with God. In our baptism vows, or the vows that we take when we formalize our membership with the church, we promise at one point to seek justice and resist evil with God being our helper. Today of all days, we must not forget our past history, and the times when people of faith have failed. Have made decisions that have harmed others. We need to remember and we need to learn from our past. What I appreciate and what challenges me the most in our recent creedal statement from the United Church of Canada, when it names that:

“The church has not always lived up to its vision. It requires the Spirit to reorient it, helping it to live an emerging faith while honoring tradition. Challenging it to live by grace, rather than entitlement, for we are called to be a blessing to the earth.”¹

What this means is that we need to keep nourishing our faith. It's not simply enough to just say and proclaim that we are people of faith. We need to keep working on and deepening our connection with God. And we need to listen deeply to the Spirit. Now one of the ways that we listen to the Spirit is by reflecting on the Gospel message and what Jesus taught. With today's Gospel lesson, it would be very simple and easy to focus on the great sacrifice and generous offering that the widow gave and leave it at that. But that wouldn't be the right thing to do, for Jesus is seeking to help the disciples figure out what is a true act of faith and what is not? Now if we skip over the first verses before we get to the great story of the widow who sacrificed everything, we might miss the warning that Jesus gave to the disciples about the scribes. The scribes who had given into and had “succumbed to the

¹ *A Song of Faith*, The United Church of Canada, 2006.

temptations of prestige, power, and materialism”², as Robert Bryan writes. And if ignore the other stuff, then we’re not listening to what Jesus is trying to teach.

Jesus is reminding the disciples of the pitfalls that the lurk just around the corner if we’re not careful. Many religious people, like the scribes that Jesus speaks of, have the potential to proclaim their faith, but possess an elitist attitude, where one can forget what the purpose and the calling of faith is. People, all of us, me included, can get lost in their purpose and call at times. With the allure of special treatment or opportunities that we maybe hadn’t had before. The reality is that we all human. We are all, at times, weak. And at times we make choices that, in retrospect, harm others. Jesus is teaching us to be aware of how people benefit from systems of violence and oppression.

So this passage, this teaching leads us to the big pictures of faith. It calls us to look directly at our intention and our motivation for being people of faith. It asks the hard question: the question of why. Why do you give? Is it out of a spirit of abundance, a spirit of generosity, or out of a spirit of expectation? Why go to church? What makes this different from any other community? Why did Job, who we’ve heard the story of over the last month, endure all of the suffering for his faith? And why would the widow give all that she had and all that she was to an institute where there was corruption and injustice, as Jesus pointed out what was happening before them?

Thomas Parker believes that “faith becomes courage to endure what we must without losing heart and thereby losing our souls.”³ Sacrifice in the world is often understood to mean giving up more than we should and less than we can. But a *biblical* sacrifice means something a little bit different. Sacrifice in the Bible is truly an act of devotion or worship. When we think about sacrifice in that way, how does that change our understanding of the widow? The widow who gave of her two coins did so as an act of faith, an act of devotion or worship. She gave all that she had to this treasury; she gave her whole self. And her intention, though not clearly named in the scripture, was most likely to thank and praise God. Perhaps what Jesus was really getting at when he used her as an example with the disciples was to help them determine whether her offering, her gift, her sacrifice was worth it if it would only be condemned in this institution that would probably let her down and not care for her. Probably not the case, but it is a possibility.

So what we need to remember today is this: the primary purpose of a church, or a community of faith, is to care for the orphaned, the widowed, the refugee, the poor – the people in need. And we need to live in a way that demonstrates this. That holds true to our

² Robert A. Bryant, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B Volume 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 289.

³ Thomas Parker, _____, p. 276.

calling. We need to bring the attention back to God. We need to be intentional in living out our faith, not for personal gain, but for the good of all people.

So, Jesus is asking the disciples to think deeply, to think carefully. We, like the disciples, at times in our life, will need to refocus. We need to be clear about our intentions and motivations. So did the widow share out of the spirit of generosity? I believe so. Did the widow share out of a spirit of trust? That by giving all that she had and all that she was that she would receive what she needed. What legacy, will we as the gathered people of God, leave for people who come next? What legacy will we leave for people who come trusting that if they give, they too will have what they need?

I hope and pray that our intentions will be good. I ask God and pray: may our intentions ensure that all people are cared for. May we be motivated by the promise that someday the world will live in peace and shalom, and that peace will surpass all understanding.

I want to end with a prayerful poem that talks about the miracle of sharing, which I believe is our call. And it says:

“God of our open futures, help us. To explore once-upon-a-time moments where stories begin, and outrageous hope, outspoken love, justice and joy are released. To see where the nudging angels move amongst people longing for comfort and community, sensing beginnings of friendship, wanting touch and affirmation. To enable life’s great feast to happen, hearts and hands, baskets and pockets to open, neighbour to share bread and peace with neighbour to make a place for another so that the most ordinary of miracles, all people are fed. Physically and spiritually.”

That is what God is calling us to do and Jesus is reminding us of this day. So go out in this world with the best of intentions. Go motivated, knowing that your choices can make a difference and bring the peace that God wants here on earth. Thanks be to God. Amen.