

Scriptures: Psalm 146

146:1 Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul!

146:2 I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

146:3 Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.

146:4 When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.

146:5 Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God,

146:6 who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever;

146:7 who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free;

146:8 the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous.

146:9 The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

146:10 The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!

Mark 12:38-44

12:38 As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,

12:39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!

12:40 They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

12:41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums.

12:42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.

12:43 Then 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.

12:44 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."

Proclamation of the Word

Sometimes a familiar Bible passage comes along, and we think. I know this one. The one about the widow giving all to God. We call this passage, "The Widow's mite" or "The Widow's offering." I know what you must be thinking. It must be Stewardship season! Is it not interesting that the Revised Common Lectionary sets this passage for fall? There must be a conspiracy. How convenient. Here comes another Stewardship sermon on how we should give everything to God.

Well, friends, this is not a stewardship sermon. At least it is not a stewardship sermon in the way one might think. Rather than the Widow's offering, perhaps we should call this passage, "Jesus Calls out Hypocrisy."

Jesus has entered Jerusalem just a few days before on a colt, the day we call Palm Sunday. He has been teaching in the Temple, confronting the authorities who have corrupted God's Temple, confronting money changers making a profit off the Lord's work, and now in Chapter 12 there are instances of Jesus confronting the leaders and the leaders trying to entrap Jesus. Jesus is onto their hypocrisy masked as questions about Scripture and faith practice. Jesus knows he is only days away from being arrested by the authorities, to face his own death. Please know that this section is not an indictment on Judaism, but in this passage it is a critique of false piety and system that feeds on the poor.

Throughout Scripture a common theme is God's care for the widow and the orphan, and the poor in general. And a call for God's people, His church, to do the same. Let's look again at Scriptures that show us who God is.

Today's psalm reminds us that our real help is from God. God is the one we can trust. Let's hear again- it is the Lord...

146:6 who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever;

146:7 who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free;

146:8 the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous.

146:9 The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

That is who God is and that is how we, made in God's image, are called to be.

The Psalm is consistent with the Torah (the Law) which calls God's people to care for these the same, the vulnerable among us.

In the New Testament book of James, the writer calls caring for the orphan and the widow- "pure religion" (James 1:7). That's faith in action.

And in today's Old Testament passage (which we did not read aloud) Naomi cares for the recently widowed daughter-in-law Ruth saying "My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you." (Ruth 3:1) You can read the book of Ruth and see how that turned out with Ruth and Boaz. A bit unconventional way of caring for widows- a little seduction and some trickery. Nothing boring about the Bible.

In fact, it may surprise you that God's scripture has more to say about money and caring for God's vulnerable people like widows and orphans, than it ever says about things that consume our attention as a society- such as human sexuality. Perhaps this passage is a reminder then of our own hypocrisy as a culture, as a larger church. When we pay more attention to these things and ignore the needs of our neighbors in need, we are distracted. In Mark 12:28ff Jesus cuts to the chase. When a teacher of the law asks what is the most important commandment.

Jesus replies with the Hebrew summary of the law, the SHEMA "'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Then he discusses the religious leaders who take the best seats, parade in long robes, and say long prayers, looking out for number one while ignoring the needs of the widow. "Devouring widow's houses" is actually what Jesus says. In contrast, the widow gives her whole life- an indictment on a system that preys on the poor. Anytime religious righteousness is used as a mask for greed and status over care for the least of these, Jesus says there will be punishment.

Jesus will not ignore her. He notices the one they do not see. He draws the disciples' eyes to one who has given her whole life to support the comfort of faith leaders.

Who would Jesus notice?

Thanks to you, Fort Hill church, I had the opportunity to serve with our most recent mission trip to El Faro in Guatemala with Beth Chapman, Stacey Miller, the Browns, and a few other friends of Fort Hill. What a privilege to serve with the missionaries there and support them in their ministry. I am amazed at what God is doing through El Faro.

I was pleased to learn that the President of Guatemala invited the Presbyterian Church to his country in 1882. Many of the mission workers had come from this mother church which faces the capital building in Guatemala City. Now the church is over 60,000 strong and is ministering to indigenous people. The protestant churches all over Guatemala were born out of the Presbyterian Church's missionary heart for the poor, the struggling, the ones who need the Good News. This passage today reminds us that we, the church, are called to notice God's vulnerable children.

Our first task was to repair the home of a widow who cooks for El Faro and has four children. She walks from the village and works 14 hour days. Our American missionary leaders Tommy and Katie simply said we want to bless her and the Bible tells us to care for the widows and orphans. Her rotten doors were replaced and her home received its first coat of paint and thanks to Beth, her first curtains for her windows. Our work included renovating a "Ronald McDonald" type home for mothers whose children have long stays at the only free medical hospital for children in the country. We were able to install safe cooking stoves and water filters for clean drinking water to families.

One of our host Missionaries, Nelita, a native Guatemalan helped shed light on the poverty and government corruption. I discovered that Guatemala is still recovering from a 36 year civil war which left whole villages wiped out, thousands of orphans, and refugees who make their home in the trash dump of the capital city. Gang violence and drug trade plague areas.

How did this happen? In 1954 the civil war began with a US company, United Fruit, who had friends in high places with our government, which prompted the coup d'etat of the Guatemalan leadership. This sparked a 36 year civil war. The fruit company was against the rights of the farmers to have more control over their land and wages and sought to fix that. We do not need to look far to see wars happening again and again in our world.

Today the effects of that war continue. So many people are desperate to be safe, fed, and secure. Many flee even at the risk of deportation and death. During our crossing the border of Honduras, we saw motor coaches filled with deportees. Our driver told me an average of 400 people per day pass through that checkpoint. Our nation is dealing with the effects with our immigration crisis and the war on drugs. Looking at the cause of this war, in this case, a company trying to profit off of near slave labor, I felt angry. Anytime greed and corruption preys upon the poor, God weeps. Jesus notices. He condemns the ones who benefit from the sacrifices of the poor.

But here is the good news, the mission of El Faro is to reach this generation of young people with the good news of Jesus Christ and to heal this generation. The facility is funded by a private foundation founded by an American Christian businessman. I am grateful that we get to be a part of that healing as our medical mission servants have in the past.

Sometimes a mission trip, a different culture and context, helps us see things in our lives better. While there doing mission across the seas, the question I asked is who is my neighbor across the street perhaps that I do not notice, but Jesus does?

I thought of Thursday night at the Minister's Cook off. We heard the story of one woman's experience of abuse and the healing that she has had in her life. She now serves to change the cycle of violence. SC is number 2 in the country for highest domestic violence. You and I as Fort Hill church get to be a small part of that healing by providing a safe place through Safe Harbor, one of our community's non-profits serving abused women and children. We support Safe Harbor through our tithes and offerings. Perhaps Jesus is calling you to become more personally involved.

Jesus notices neighbors who are suffering from abuse and asks us, his disciples, to do the same.

Secondly, in coming weeks you will be asked to care for our neighbors through the giving of Christmas food baskets. I understand our team is changing how that will work, asking for local schools and Clemson Community Care to help us find our neighbors in need of a little love and care. We will be asked to be more personally involved by taking an angel off the tree and going to shop for the food that we will then deliver. On Saturday, December 19th we will first gather to eat, worship and pray over those families and our mission that day. We will offer a sign of God's grace in the form of food. God's grace comes in the form of groceries.

Jesus notices those who are on the edge economically and asks us, his disciples, to do the same.

Thirdly, next week starting November 15 we will host Family Promise a supportive ministry to help families rise out of homelessness. Usually we welcome these strangers who stay in our church, setting up bedrooms, meals, and people to share the love of Christ. Due to our renovation First Baptist is allowing us to use their space next week until we receive full occupancy. If you are nervous about serving, ask a buddy to do so with you. Becky Dewitt and I have made it our habit to serve as overnight hosts together.

Jesus notices those who are struggling to find shelter and provide for needs and asks us, his disciples, to do the same.

Finally, in giving to our regular stewardship, you get to help provide for God's church so we might fulfill our mission and ministry. Fed on the Word of God, saved by God's grace, we are sent to serve in Jesus' name. Calvin Seminary's Scott Hoezee writes,

Everything we do in the Christian life—including giving to the offering plate—is an outflow and an overflow of God's grace. This grace allows us to rest easy by taking joy in whatever we are able to do for God. Grace gives us the freedom to be who we have become as new creatures in Christ. We use our gifts and give of ourselves not because of some stern external obligation or pressure or because we've been made to feel guilty as we are manipulated by the church. ⁱ

All we have is a gift of God's gracious hand. When you join as a member of this church we ask you to worship, study, serve and give, not out of compulsion, but as those who have been blessed by the grace of God. As our stewardship theme states, "We are blessed to be a blessing."

Our Constitution, *the Presbyterian Book of Order*, states our Church's calling this way:

"The Church is called to be a sign in and for the world of a new reality which God has made available to people in Jesus Christ."ⁱⁱ

Did you know that? How are we to be a sign? By...

*healing and reconciling and binding up wounds...ministering to the needs of the poor, the sick, the lonely, and the powerless...engaging in the struggle to free people from sin, fear, oppression, hunger, and injustice...giving itself and its substance to the service of those who suffer...sharing with Christ in the establishing of his just, peaceable, and loving rule in the world. The Church is called to undertake this mission **even at the risk of losing its life.***

Jesus served this mission even at the risk of losing his life. He calls the church into this mission even at the risk of losing its life. I told you this was not the typical stewardship sermon. Jesus asks us not just to give our money, our resources, Jesus asks us for our lives, in order that we might find life. God is a God who protects, defends, loves, and we can trust God in all things. It is a paradox of our faith that in order to save your life, you must give it away.

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ⁱ Scott Hoezee, "Sermon Starters for Proper 27B" at Calvin Theological Seminary's website. cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-27b/?type=the_lectionary_gospel

ⁱⁱ *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II, Book of Order, 2005-2007* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church,(USA), 2005), G-3.0200-3.0400 (emphasis added).