

Today's selection takes place on the Tuesday before Jesus' crucifixion, and are his last two lessons before leaving the Temple. Up until this point, while He has been in Jerusalem, He has been interrogated by others, kept on the defensive. This is when Jesus goes on the offensive. He has been railing against the scribes in His responses, how their teaching are inadequate; but now, Jesus shows how their religious practices are hypocritical.

Jesus' first lesson is one that can be easily transposed into the 21st century. Jesus starts off about the scribes who like to strut about in their fancy clothes. Back then, long robes were the apparel of the well-to-do and used to honor the learned. It signified that the wearer did not do manual labor. Much like a suit today signified that the wearer did not have a profession where the nice suit would be sullied. A tie is not something you would find in a machinist's shop, because it could easily be caught up in the machines and choke the wearer.

The part about being “greeted with respect,” is in most other translations as “salutation.” How we greet one another, and the accolades that separate one person from others. The most obvious example are my own titles of Reverend or Pastor. I was reminded of Divinity School, where we would hear about some Episcopal clergy who were addressed as, “The Right Reverend.” Well, we Congregational students responded with the joke that we would prefer to be addressed as, “The Wrong Reverend.”

In the synagogues back then, the men usually stood, and only the teachers sat. The places of honor were assigned not by seniority, but by prominence in the community. Unfortunately, Congregationalists centuries ago had an unintentionally similar practice in our history. As a fundraiser, families paid an annual fee for their pews, and they chose where they sat. If you could not afford a pew, you sat in the balcony with the teenagers, or off to the side.

At that convention I worked at last month, I was talking to an old friend of mine who was staffing the information desk when a young man walked up

with a pass of a type I had never seen before. At these events, there are different types of passes with very obvious differences to quickly differentiate them. As an artist / vendor, my pass this year had a blue border, staff had red borders, and so on for guests, panelists, and also how many days you paid to attend. If you were under 18, your pass was flipped on its side, so that security could quickly tell who should or should not be in certain areas at certain times. This guy though, his badge was super-sized...four times bigger than everyone else's. It said "VIP" on it, and I asked him point blank about his badge. He said that he paid extra for it, so now he can cut to the front of any line, and other such privileges that rendered me speechless. I looked at my friend, who shrugged and rolled his eyes. I just walked away from him, disgusted that this was an option. How was he more entitled than any one else who attended? If it was something that was raffled off or something like that, I would not have minded, but no, he PAID for this pass, which was so big, it set him apart, and he could walk right past people who prepared, planned ahead, and sacrificed attending other things to wait in line for something.

Well, then Jesus spoke on how those flashy scribes would, for the sake of appearances, make long prayers. People like that, who set themselves apart from everyone else, show a lack of love, and so, Jesus tells us that the road to greatness is the way of service, we see that their hearts are not in their prayers, so their actions and prayers will be judged more critically. If they are hypocritical, if they proclaim their love for God in one breath, then turn around and devour a widow's house, then they will be judged by God.

Jesus is the champion of the people against leaders who extort or are hypocritical, and in the second lesson, He further illustrates this. It starts with Jesus sitting. There is this comical commentary on that verse, where some manuscripts have Jesus standing, because how else could He see what was going on over across the way? Others have Him sitting, because that's what Teachers did, and it's Jesus, He can see wherever He wants!

Well, the Treasury was in the Temple complex. A room with thirteen chests, each with a trumpet-shaped tube attached for dropping coins into in order to support the Temple worship. This was completely voluntary, so anyone

could have just walked by and not given anything.

The money that is mentioned changes based on the translation and who did it. The King James Version, produced in the 17th century in England, says mites and farthing. Our pew Bibles' translation is an update of a translation done in the mid-20th century in New Haven, so we have copper coins and pennies. The Greek says the widow gave two λεπτα, a fractional currency, it's value was so low, which added up to a Roman quadrans, which is a quarter of the Roman equivalent of a penny. Not worth much at all. Writing about this reminded me of Bill Cosby's immortal question to God, "What's a cubit?!"

To be clear, Jesus is NOT denouncing those who give from abundance! Jesus is saying that true giving is to be measured relatively to what is left, not the absolute size. The gift which counts the most is the gift that cost the giver the most to give.

And that poor widow would not have had much in the first place. Those who were most in need in those times were the widows and orphans. The Bible states over and over again that it is our duty to provide for the widow and orphan, for they are the most displaced members of society. That widow would have had to rely on handouts, begging on the street for the generosity of others to take pity on her. And what did she do when she able to scrounge up some money? She didn't get something to eat, she didn't save it for something else, she gave it to a voluntary offering in the Temple! She was under no obligation to give! Even more so, since she was a widow! In the sight of God, those coins were big business for that poor widow.

Serving in AmeriCorps, our pay was very low. Every one of us had a budget to follow, and there was only enough left over to have one lunch out a week, so we chose to have it together on payday. When Christmas came around, there was no question, none of us could afford to give gifts...we could not afford to do secret santa, either! But one of my teammates, unbeknownst to the rest of us, had been gathering office supplies for months to craft cards for each of us, personalized based on what she knew about the rest of us. They were very simple and cheap, but she sacrificed elsewhere and worked so hard to be able to make them for us, and that made them special.

Consider the noise of coins on those thirteen chutes were making, and we have Jesus, who is attuned to hear the faintest noise of two nearly worthless coins given by the poor widow. And consider that poor widow's heart. What she did lifted her voluntary gift out of the routine and into the realm of sacrifice. What difference in the grand scheme of things could 2¢ make? Well, no gift of love is too small to count. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

[PAUSE]

God of life, we praise Your abiding presence from generation to generation, blessing your people, strengthening us to lives of service, empowering us to witness. Hear our prayers that we offer on behalf of your creation.

We thank You for our daily blessings, and for those You have sent to help us in our lives. We thank you for the generous donations that will help us help our neighbors in need.

We know we are not perfect, so we pray for the forgiveness of our transgressions. We pray for your guidance to help us learn to live our lives in more loving ways.

We lift up the prayers of our hearts for those who are troubled in mind, body, or spirit. We pray for their relief, and we pray for their caregivers. We pray for those who are lost, so that they may find guidance. We pray for those who protect us, please keep them safe as they have kept us safe. And we pray that you help us to be instruments of your divine love.

We are reminded of all in world who need our prayers. We pray for the families of the victims of violence. We pray for the refugees around the world, both home & abroad, for victims of natural disasters, please see them to safer places, and we give thanks to those who provide them shelter. We pray for those who are enduring drought & famine. We pray for all to have a safe place.

We especially pray for:

O God, Grant us, that as we serve You now on earth, we may one day rejoice with all the saints in Your kingdom of light and peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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."