

“The Widow’s Might” • 1 Kings 17:8-16; Mark 12:38-44
Sheth LaRue • November 7, 2021
Aurora First Presbyterian Church

This morning we’re going on a little road trip before we hear our gospel reading, and we first head southeast to the warm sun and white beaches of Florida. In 2018 Robert Goodman had been a history teacher for over 23 years at Palm Beach Gardens Community High School in Florida; in April of that year he learned he had stage 3 colon cancer. Moving quickly, his doctors put him on the fast-track for chemotherapy, forcing him to use 38 days of sick leave for doctor’s appointments and chemo treatment, along with the necessary days of rest afterward.

In the middle of this treatment Mr. Goodman learned he was going to be short 20 sick days needed to complete his chemotherapy. Without these days he would either have to go back to work in the schools – his body now fully immunocompromised – or he would have to quit his job and lose all his health insurance.

Before resorting to have to decide between these two options Mr. Goodman attempted a third: begging. Setting aside what little dignity he had left, Mr. Goodman posted on Facebook, seeking out any district employees who might be willing to donate their sick leave to carry him through chemotherapy. Teachers, staff members, administrators and lunchroom workers saw the post and transferred 75 sick days to Mr. Goodman.¹ This truly remarkable act of goodwill allowed Mr. Goodman to receive his treatment and he continues to live and teach to this day. Thank God for loving communities and good neighbors...but are we missing the point?

We move from the sunshine state and saunter to faintly-frozen Flint, Michigan. As you may recall, in 2015 water quality testing confirmed lead contamination in the city’s entire water supply system thereby forcing the city, state, and federal government to declare a state of emergency.² As the governments struggled to begin the daunting task of replacing the entire water system, people began to get thirsty.

In the first year of the declared emergency the state of Michigan delivered cases of bottled water each week to 2700 families but after that year water was still provided by the state

¹ Lauren Lee, “A teacher battling cancer ran out of sick days. School employees showered him with theirs.” CNN Health, December 4, 2018, accessed November 5, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/14/health/iyw-florida-teachers-cancer-support-donation-trnd/index.html>

² Wikipedia contributors, "Flint water crisis," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Flint_water_crisis&oldid=1052179374 (accessed November 6, 2021).

but residents had to pick it up at a centralized location. This small change in access left those without transportation, those homebound, those experiencing homeless without water. The people were getting thirsty again.

That's when Flint-area churches stepped in, following Jesus' command to give drink to the thirsty.³ With the state of Michigan providing the water, an interdenominational group of twelve people brought cases of bottled water to the doorsteps of not just 2700, but 3500 families each week. Leaning on grants and donations to pay for the workers, trucks, and fuel, this program worked tirelessly to ensure that area residents had clean, safe water to drink.⁴

Today, a good percentage of Flint's residents are able to safely use water from their taps, provided they have government-funded water filters, replacement cartridges, and test their water frequently. While pipe replacement continues, it has been by the generosity and diligent work of the residents of the community that their neighbors have been able to drink safe, clean water. Thank God for loving communities and good neighbors...but are we missing the point?

Our journey continues, moving from the streets of Flint to our own backyard where more than sixty local grocers are partnering with Ozarks Food Harvest to raise funds to feed our neighbors. Now in its 23rd year, the 'Check Out Hunger' campaign provides funding to reach over 30,000 individuals weekly and provides more than 23 million meals annually across its 28-county service area.⁵

The program arose out of the needs we bear witness to every day: one in five of our neighbor children and one in six of our adult neighbors have no idea where their next meal will come from. Food insecurity isn't just a local issue; the lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life⁶ leaves nearly 37 million Americans hungry each night. The Ozarks Food Harvest partners with over 270 local food pantries and organizations to help ease the pangs of hunger in our neighbor's stomachs while also working to change systemic issues that perpetuate food insecurity: the lack of affordable housing, social isolation, chronic or acute health problems, high medical costs, low wages, unaffordable and inaccessible child care.

³ Matthew 25:35

⁴ Tim Galloway, "Meet the heroes who deliver water in Flint" Flintside.com, November 10, 2017. Accessed November 6, 2021. <https://www.flintside.com/features/meet-the-heroes-who-deliver-water-in-Flint.aspx>

⁵ "Our Programs" Ozarks Food Harvest, accessed November 6, 2021. <https://ozarksfoodharvest.org/programs/>

⁶ US Department of Agriculture, (2019). Definitions of Food Security. Available online at: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx>

It is only when grocery store customers add a \$1, \$3, or \$5 tax-free donation to their grocery bill that our hungry neighbors will find food on their tables. It is when we who have the means come together to meet this ever-growing need that those without can eat again. It is when you and I open our hands to give and love that they can eat. Thank God for loving communities and good neighbors...but are we missing the point?

Our travels close this morning as we venture across space and time to the temple in Jerusalem where Jesus was teaching a crowd who “was listening to him with delight.”⁷ The people were delighted because Jesus had recently made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem,⁸ clearing out the temple of all those corrupt and oppressive money changers and vendors who blocked access to worship God. Jesus stepped into the courts and began to once again denounce the Jewish leadership that has fought tooth-and-nail to unjustly maintain the status quo. Jesus is here in Jerusalem to challenge the powerful and oppressive institutions, governments, and systems; he is here to call them to return to their upright ways; he is here to suffer unto death for this work and these words. Jesus speaks to the crowd that stands before him in the temple – and he speaks to us this morning – from the gospel of Mark. Listen to the word of the Lord:

“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, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

“He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he [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. 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.”⁹

Jesus castigates this class of Jewish teachers and he praises a poor widow who gave everything she had; both stories are well-known to those of us who have been in church for years. These words are indeed trustworthy and true and thanks be to God, but as Jesus speaks to

⁷ Mark 11:37

⁸ Mark 11:1-11

⁹ Mark 12:38-44

this loving community of good neighbors, I wonder if we have all-too-often miss-taught, miss-used, and flat-out missed the point of Christ's teaching as he sat there in the temple?

The scribes, so often spoken of in the gospels, were a class within the Jewish leadership who served alongside the chief priests, Sadducees, and Pharisees. Tasked with the legal documents, the scribes did not merely copy them down but often wrote the most critical and crucial documents related to financial and political matters. And beyond merely writing up legal jargon, "after the exile and the Law's firm establishment at the core of Israel's life, scribes gained further prominence as interpreters and teachers of God's Law."¹⁰ The scribes enacted the laws, interpreted the laws, and taught the laws. The scribes knew the word and were tasked with faithfully applying it, not just to the people they served, but they *themselves* were to faithfully live it out in their own lives and in their work for God.

Somewhere along the line this position of power and service became corrupt and Jesus warns the people to guard themselves from the scribes, those "dry old men [wearing] brocaded robes"¹¹ who craved power and prestige seated at their prominent positions of honor in homes and houses of worship. Jesus warns the people to be wary of the scribes who exploited, abused, and profited from the weak and vulnerable. Jesus warns the people to be wary of the scribes who "devour widows' houses,"¹² making the helpless homeless while breathing long-winded, pointless prayers.

Jesus warns that these people with power desire attention and recognition, not justice and mercy for all of God's people. Jesus warns that these people with the knowledge and the answers "compete for power in the religious arena...they crave the "best seats" in the synagogues"¹³ instead of ensuring that all have access to wisdom and understanding. Jesus warns that these people with the finest clothes seek to be seen rather than to see the naked and poor all around them. And Jesus points to the widow giving all she had, giving everything she had – just two small coins – Jesus points to her placing them in the temple treasury not to lift up her faithfulness

¹⁰ Robert A. Bryant, "Exegetical Perspective of Mark 12:38-44" from *Feasting on the Word* Year B, Volume 4, Barbara Brown Taylor, et. al. eds., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 287.

¹¹ Frances Croak Frank, "Woman's Body" Bridget Mary's Blog, March 19, 2015 accessed November 6, 2021. <http://bridgetmarys.blogspot.com/2015/03/womans-body-poem-by-frances-croak-frank.html>

¹² Mark 12:40

¹³ Robert A. Bryant, "Exegetical Perspective of Mark 12:38-44" from *Feasting on the Word* Year B, Volume 4, Barbara Brown Taylor, et. al. eds., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 287.

but to condemn those in power who had convinced her that she had to give it all to ensure their opulent way of life.

Jesus' teaching here in the temple is "an indictment upon any religious system that results in a poor widow giving all she has so that the system's leaders may continue to live lives of wealth of comfort."¹⁴ He isn't attacking the religious practice, nor is he attacking those who are suffering in poverty...Jesus here is condemning the systems and practices that call for poor widows to sacrifice the last two pennies they possess...Jesus here is condemning "any system that appropriates the property of the poor and the near-destitute in order to perpetuate the wealth of the elite."¹⁵ Jesus is condemning any hypocritical person, system, or institution that walks on the backs of the poor and the powerless, that preys greedily upon others for personal gain, that forces families to futile, infertile fields.

The point that we're missing in all these stories is this: systems, institutions, and governments should be held accountable for the way they treat their workers, their congregations, their voters, and when any of these abuse anyone or misuse anything we have a calling from Christ to condemn, criticize, and change them, restoring them to their intended upright ways.

We should certainly applaud the community that surrounded and supported Robert Goodman as he and his medical team treated his cancer, but we should also challenge and change the structures that forced him to either beg for paid leave, quit his job, or return to a public school in a fragile and compromised body.

We should certainly applaud the twelve individuals who worked diligently to ensure all of Flint had access to clean and safe bottled water and we should be grateful for those who are working to identify and replace the water supply system, but we should also confront and correct the institutions that allowed the entire crisis to unfold in the first place.

We should certainly applaud and support the 'Check Out Hunger' campaign and the people who ensure the Ozarks has secure access to food, but we should also denounce and reconstruct the systems that prevent our neighbors from obtaining food, accessing affordable health care and housing, receiving respectable education and child care.

¹⁴ Rodger Y. Nishioka, "Pastoral Perspective of Mark 12:38-44" from *Feasting on the Word* Year B, Volume 4, Barbara Brown Taylor, et. al. eds., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 286.

¹⁵ Rodger Y. Nishioka, "Pastoral Perspective of Mark 12:38-44," 286.

We should certainly applaud the widow's willingness to give all she owned to the work of the church and to the furthering of God's reign, but we should also call out and clean-up the religious institutions and organizations which promise prosperity if people give their all to the treasury of the church.

Jesus calls us into the same work he was living out: to bring mercy and justice to the poor and powerless...to challenge unjust, unethical, and unequitable structures and systems that deny food and drink, clothing and shelter...to build programs and policies that free those imprisoned by evil and hate, mental health and domestic violence. Jesus calls us to protect the vulnerable and defenseless that live among us in all of creation and to protect the very creation itself. Jesus calls us to love; to love God and neighbor as much as we love ourselves.

Friends, let us stop worrying about the cost of unleaded gas and start worrying about the cost of unleaded water. Let us resist "the economic violence that comes with capitalism"¹⁶ and stand boldly against the economic status quo. Let us divest from evil in all its forms and ensure that economics trickle up. Let us avoid interest gains through selfish means and instead seek interest in our neighbors. May we act in the world for the very least among us, challenging the political and economic systems in the church, in the nation, and in the world. Amen.

¹⁶ Rodger Y. Nishioka, "Pastoral Perspective of Mark 12:38-44" from *Feasting on the Word* Year B, Volume 4, Barbara Brown Taylor, et. al. eds., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 288.