

25th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 11.11.18

Scripture: **Mark 12:38-44**

As Jesus 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 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."

Of course, there are nearly 20 million veterans living in the United States today. So what could possibly be said about such a group? Some served in wartime; most never saw action. Some bear wounds seen and unseen; most aren't wounded at all. Actually, veterans on the whole are doing better than non-veterans. Their incomes are slightly higher, their work of slightly higher status and greater stability. Their median age is higher, too though, so higher wages and greater stability might just go with that territory. The median age of the veteran man is 64, while the median age of the non-veteran man is 41. The difference is narrower when it comes to the median age of the veteran woman: the median age for veteran women is 46 while for non-veteran women it's 41.

Come to think of it, I like the phrase "non-veteran woman" or "non-veteran man." I came upon it in a government document reporting the general statistics of veterans. I like it because it makes veterans seem less of special status or less deviating from the norm. There are veterans and there are non-veterans; I am a non-veteran, as most Americans are nowadays. In some countries, everyone is eventually a veteran (those, at least, who don't die in combat). According to some people in our country, we should aim to build a society in which everyone will eventually become a veteran, everyone serving in the military in some way. Barring that, you end up with a military whose service people mostly joined because they had little other choice.

I admit that's my assumption these days: you join the military if you have little other choice. A Facebook post suggested I'm not alone in that. A wealthy, highly educated friend posted that her son, a senior in high school, was looking for something to aid him in his eventual desire to serve in the Navy, I can't remember what. People who posted in reply seemed to think she was joking, or was looking for ways to talk him out of it. "No," she replied to a few. He wants this, she wants it for him, and she admires that the thought occurred at all.

The thought never occurred to me—not until my father, who had been in the Navy, suggested to me that I give military service some thought. He probably figured I wasn't really prepared for how the world actually works, which I realize now made me terrifically suited for the church, this place where we refuse to submit to how the world actually works.

But I didn't give it a second thought, hardly much of a first thought.

I wish I had. If nothing else it would have made me more prepared to imagine the life of a soldier, and more curious in accounting for the persistence of the military in human history, not to mention to wonder about the relationship between the military and the Church.

For some churches, being a soldier would preclude you being a member at all. That would be one of things that, to be a Christian, you must renounce—state violence, the preparing for, or the making of, war. The pacifist denominations used to insist on that, anyway. For other churches, though, to be a soldier is to be more Christ-like than the rest of us. Here, with me in the pulpit, we've adopted a wimpy silence about it all, which is on me. I'm sorry about that.

This story of the widow in the Temple always falls late in the season of Pentecost, as we're approaching the end of the Church year. This, because the scene falls late in Jesus' ministry, in the final week of his life. He has traveled the region, wandering several times over its terrain, and now has entered Jerusalem in a final confrontation—with the religious authorities in the center of power where they exercise that power.

I imagine they did this with varying degrees of integrity and corruption. These were individual people, after all, so each one likely approached their task with some distinction. To assume otherwise, to assume that all the religious authorities amounted to a monolith of mal-intent, courts an anti-Semitism that we really should just get past. The problem that Jesus seemed often to have with the Scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the like, isn't because they were *Jewish* authorities, it's because they were *religious* authorities, or more (basically even than that) it's because they were powerful authorities. They were people with an enormity of structural power and, however they might have exercised that power from person to person, they as a whole functioned in furtherance of that power.

This, I submit, is what Jesus objected to. The use of power to secure that power, the use of power to secure *more* power: this is all to abuse their power. After all, these priests, these clergy: theirs was supposed to be not to dominate, but to serve.

And yet, we know how this story goes. Given the choice of domination or service: we know how that goes.

It's a strange choice, then, that this scenario of the widow at the Temple treasury while Jesus looked on is often the centerpiece of Stewardship Sunday.

It's that time of year, of course, when many congregations have their Stewardship Sundays, that time of year when we hear of the widow's penny gift. "This is what true giving is like," those Stewardship Sundays suggest. "So no gift is too small, no giver too unimportant." Which is true enough. It just doesn't seem to be what Jesus was getting at when he sat himself down at the Temple treasury and watched the crowd putting money into the offertory. He was there to test his theory, to see whether what he suspected to be the case was true.

It was true. "Beware the scribes, the tippy top of the social strata. Beware them, these who like to walk around in impressive suits, and to be greeted with awe by their lessers, and to have the best real estate with the best views, and to receive the best invitations to the best parties. They devour widows' meager estates, instead offer thoughts and prayers." And with that teaching still hanging the air, Jesus sat himself down opposite the depository to test its truthfulness.

The widow to come along with her two coins was that very proof. No model for modest giving, or hero of modest living, she was evidence of injustice—and, worse, injustice established under the guise of justice.

The Temple had courts for a reason, you know, which weren't just courtyards but were courts. The Temple was a place (yes) of religious piety but also of social order and redress. If you had a dispute with a neighbor, here it could be hashed out. If you had a question as to Law and its living out, here it could be interpreted and made clear. The Temple was a place of religious practice *and* social cohesion. It was supposed to be a gleaming model of justice and social good.

But it wasn't, or at least it wasn't *always*, or perhaps it wasn't as of late. And this widow who happened along at just this moment: she was evidence of that. And she was either someone with perfect timing or she was altogether too common, of a type that would have come along whenever Jesus sat himself down at the Temple treasury. These widows really were a dime a dozen.

This isn't a story well suited for Stewardship Sunday. It is, however, a story well suited for Veterans' Day—insofar as soldiers find themselves enmeshed in, and instrumental to, a much larger social imaginary, which they alone could but hardly influence. Soldiers can be made great under

leadership that is good and clear, and amidst militaries that are worthy of them, in service of aims that are humane, commissioned by societies whose work toward justice continues uncorrupted. Soldiers can be made great. They can also be degraded, dehumanized, made cynical or nihilistic, given the larger social imaginary in which they serve. We forget that, or dismiss that, at our own peril.

One thing's for certain, the persistent reality of war and conflict won't go away, not even if we abolish the military or shame soldiers for their service in it. So our task when it comes to soldiers, the military, and the veterans such things produce is far more complicated than merely the question of whether or not. Given all this, the possibility that soldiers serve for the sake a great good is as real as the possibility that that window's two pennies might have been well invested, well spent.

But they also might not be.

And this makes all the difference.

I hope this is a question ever before every decision-maker as regards the many future veterans who are in their charge, not to mention the future war-dead who won't make it veteran status.

As for our current veterans, we honor them today, as we have now for a hundred years. Theirs is no unambiguous task. They're to follow orders, so we must be certain the orders they receive are to the good. They're to disobey orders when those orders are to ill, so we must encourage a sophistication of discernment that is only hardly reached.

For their willingness to wade into the murky moral waters of life in the world, we offer thanks and praise both to them (some of whom are *us*) and to the God who as well entered murky moral waters when taking on flesh in Jesus Christ. It was the hope of the one whom we call the Prince of Peace what we hear in this recording when the guns of the First World War went silent 100 years ago.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/listen-moment-guns-fell-silent-ending-world-war-i-180970772/>

Thanks be to God.