

How Will We Steward Creation?

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A world in need now summons us to labor, love and give; to make our life an offering to God that all may live. The Church of Christ is calling us to make the dream come true; a world redeemed by Christ-like love, all life in Christ made new. Amen.

In addition to our Lord, Himself, in the Gospel lesson we just heard, there are four other characters that I want to speak with you about. And the first is a bit of a strange character, it's the Temple itself, the Temple itself. Later I'll speak to you about the scribe and the widow, but for now, the Temple.

Just as this church is symbol and place for us, where we re-orient ourselves to God and the world, where we know that God is at the center and we seek to orient our lives around God as that center. So, in Jerusalem, the Temple was symbol and site for the orientation of our brothers and sisters, our Jewish predecessors, lives. The Holy of Holies where God was understood to dwell was at the very center of the Temple. That place, as this place is for us, was a place where they reminded themselves, not once a year on a pledge Sunday, but day in and day out, of the stewardship of creation that God asked of them. All holy places in the world seek to remind their worshippers that we come from God, that all that we have is from God and that out of thanksgiving, if not duty, we are to give back.

There in that Temple, let me describe to you the place where Jesus was teaching. Because it was a special section of the Temple, it was called the Court of Women and in it was set the Treasury. But let me set for you, also, the scene in time so that you will know the context in which Jesus speaks. This is the last week of Jesus life, when He is teaching in the Temple. He has, just a few days before, made His triumphal entry, what we call Palm Sunday. And He has already cleansed the Temple with the overturning of the money changers tables, there in that Treasury. He returns to the Temple on this particular day and does one final bit of teaching about stewardship and about what is to take place at the end of the week. He stands in the Treasury, and unlike this church, there in that Treasury there were thirteen trumpet shaped chests, for people to make their offerings. Each chest was clearly marked, the purpose for which the offering was to be given, clearly marked on the outside of the chest. And as you might imagine, this trumpet shape served to magnify the sound of the offerings made. You know how a trumpet works, pour in a large set of coins and there will be a great rattling and everyone will know that you've made a large gift. Put in too ha'penny, as the widow did, there will be just a tiny tinkle. All very public, all very public.

Jesus stands in that Treasury and criticizes the whole system because the original intent of the Temple and its stewardship has gone badly awry. This isn't the first time He's made that criticism but it will be the next to the last. Those of you, who remember Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, where he says, be careful, don't sound a trumpet

before you when you make your offering. Almost certainly He was referring to these chests. He wanted us to be quieter about our offering.

So here He stands in the Treasury and now its time for our second character, the scribe. Jesus actually talks about the scribes as a whole class and He's not happy with them. We need to understand what their role was in the society of His time and in the Temple, to understand why He is so upset. The scribes were members of an aristocratic class, they had power, position, almost always great wealth, enormous education, and they were the religious lawyers of the day, adjudicating what was right and what was wrong according to the law of Israel. At the heart of the law they were to administer was the idea that God wanted all creation to be stewarded by all God's people for the good of all. And that those who were particularly vulnerable, like widows and orphans and strangers, were to be given special consideration. As is often the case, even in our day, these scribes were appointed, when someone became a widow, the trustee of a widow's estate because women were considered, in that time, incompetent to manage their own financial affairs.

So imagine with me, if you will, that Jesus is not talking just about a particular class but that He has spied with His eagle eye and His clear heart, the particular scribe who had been assigned to this particular widow on that particular day. He sees that scribe pour an enormous sum of money into the trumpet and it makes a great din. And of course people smile, celebrating his generosity. The widow puts in two ha'penny, and here our translation in English is a little off, it says all her living. In the original Greek it really says "her whole life", her bios. She's at the end of her rope; this is all she has left. Now you may have heard this preached before in a kind of romantic haze, where the widow is admired for her great generosity. And in part Jesus is commending her for her enormous generosity; she's given the last bit that she has. But He's doing something else that is just as important, and probably more important. He's holding her up also as symbol of how bad stewardship does damage. This scribe who is wealthy, this scribe who is wealthy, has administered her estate so that she has nothing left. Nothing left, he is still wealthy. No one except Jesus will celebrate her offering, but they will all celebrate his. And lest we think that this was a problem just in Jesus day, let me remind you of that epidemic in our own society, of people who call widows and widowers on the phone and offer them wonderful investment schemes, that turn out to be terrible scams and leave those people with little. I know about this close at hand, my own father was the victim of such a scheme.

None of this sounds like very good news, does it? The story ends on a somber note with this woman giving her very life. And no good news seems to follow it. But there is great good news that follows at the end of this Holy Week. Jesus is not only in word and in deed reversing the Temple treasury system and how one made one's peace with God through payments. He will with His very life, on the cross, end that system and give us a new start, a new covenant, a new chance, a new way to be stewards of that creation. He gets stretched out between heaven and earth and becomes our way of joining God, free of charge. He stretches out His arms east to west and gathers in anyone who is willing and says, "in the new covenant you are all equal, no hierarchy, no trumpeting chests, every gift offered, equal." And with His very body and blood, He purchases for us a new way

forward, His new way forward. If you've never noticed, someday as you make your way to communion, notice above the Nun's Gallery that quotation from Mark's Gospel where Jesus tells us why He came at all. He says, "I came to give my life a ransom for many." Many, widows, widowers, the sick, the oppressed, the enslaved, yes even those like the scribe, enslaved to their own status in life and their inability to follow their own law.

So the choice He leaves to us is what way are we going to follow? Not just on this Pledge Sunday, though certainly today, but each day, day in and day out. Where will our Temple be and what kind of Temple will it be? Will we be looking for social status, accomplishment, success, in the world's terms? Will we, like the scribe, want to be saluted in the marketplaces and have the best seats at the table and have everyone admire us? Or will we choose something closer to Jesus way? And closer to the widow's way, but freely, not manipulated, giving as much of our all, of our life as we can. The widows of our world await our answer and close at hand, those who gather on our porch each night, the homeless, wait for our answer.

In their name, I'd like to end this sermon with a brief story, a story given to me by Sue Dickenson, a member of the Altar Guild here. One day, Sue was preparing for services and getting the supplies ready and she found one of the homeless coming into the church and asking her for an envelope. He said, "I have a dollar that I want to give to the church, do you have an envelope for me?" She scurried around and found one of the pledge envelopes just like the ones in your pew today and gave it to him. He put the dollar in the envelope, sealed it and with a pencil wrote \$1 on the front. He took the pledge card and said to her, "I'll be back with my pledge next week." As Sue tells the story, she ends it by saying, "I don't know whether he returned with his pledge card or not, but I imagine that he did and that he gives a dollar each week, \$52 for the year." The last line of her story is, "by so doing he comes much closer to the tithe than I have managed." I would echo Sue's words; he's come much closer to the tithe than I have managed.

So a choice awaits us, this day and every day. How will we steward the creation that God has given us? Where will our Temple be and how will we serve? Like a scribe or like the widow or the homeless person on our front porch. The choice is ours. By God's grace, may we imitate our Lord, the widow and the homeless. Amen.