

“Why We Remember”

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November 6, 2016

Text: Mark 12:38-44

38As (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, 39and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! 40They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

41He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 43Then 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. 44For 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.”

A little while ago I read a news item about how in order to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Battle of the Atlantic and the contribution of Merchant Mariners to the war effort, the British mint has produced a limited number of silver coins, using the silver that had been recovered from a merchant ship that had been torpedoed by a German U-boat during the second World War. As I read the article, I was reminded of a man I knew named Jim, who himself was a veteran of the Second World War and a merchant seaman. In fact, Jim had been on a merchant ship that was torpedoed and sunk in the Gulf of St. Lawrence in the spring of 1942. I remember Jim as he described that experience to me. Especially him describing himself floating in the cold water with his life jacket on, waiting, hoping and praying that he would be plucked out of the water and rescued. Jim, with the many years that had separated him from that fateful day was actually able to look back on the situation with a bit of humour but also a degree of seriousness when he said, “Dale, I floated there in the water and wondered to myself, what in the world am I doing here!” With a little laugh he would say, “Any sailor knows he belongs in the boat and not in the water!” Jim also spoke of feeling scared and alone. He shared with me about how that moment in his life

changed the way he understood his faith. As he hoped and prayed that he would be rescued, the reality was one where he knew there was a good chance he wouldn't survive. Thus, as he said to me, his prayer wasn't just, "God please help me be rescued. It was God please rescue me. If I die here, God please remember me."

Jim's greatest fear in that time and place was a fear that I am sure filled the hearts of many men and women during those years of war just as they fill the hearts and minds of any person during a great time of trial. It was the fear of being abandoned...forgotten. Yet, in the midst of that fear, he realized his greatest hope was that God would remember him.

The fear of being abandoned or forsaken is one of the most powerful fears any of us can experience. I cannot begin to tell you how many times I have spent with individuals, who when faced with the death of a spouse, the betrayal of a friend, the loss of a job...the list goes on...what they begin to identify with is this experience of abandonment. They feel left alone to fend for one's self knowing they cannot do it on their own. I believe when this happens, it reveals a need that is imprinted on each of our souls. We need to be remembered, rescued, saved, loved, call it what you will. Each and every one of us needs this hope.

In this morning's gospel reading from Mark we are meant to consider another circumstance of abandonment. Here in Mark we are given the description of a poor widow who looks as if she has been left to survive in a world that has all but forsaken her. A world that takes all she has in order to leave her with nothing. This isn't a woman who should be pouring her last two meager coins into the public treasury located at the Great Temple in Jerusalem. The centre of not only the Jewish faith, but the social and cultural centre as well. As we enter this text, we find Jesus and his

disciples together in the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus has come to this center of the cultural world of first century Judea. Jesus has come to the political heart of the world around him.

Many believed that this great temple had really been rebuilt by King Herod most likely for political reasons and not religious ones. Reestablishing the temple was a way for Herod to maintain the allegiance of dissident Jews while bending to the Romans. It was less about faithfulness and more about maintaining political control. Even though Herod was more or less puppet King controlled by the Romans, by building a grand temple with great walls, maybe Herod could give an illusion of his importance and the importance of the Jewish Kingdom.

Jesus was always aware of and often made note of the ulterior motives that existed in the life of Temple. You may recall the images of Jesus when he overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple saying that the temple had strayed from its original purpose of being a house of prayer, and a sacred symbol of God's presence among the people -for all the people. Jesus and his disciples would often park themselves on steps of the temple to watch the comings and goings outside the temple. Observing all of this activity would certainly have been an education. Jesus could see through so much and wanted his disciples to see through it too. It is Jesus who drew the disciples' attention to this lonely widow making her way up the stairs to the treasury, taking out a couple of copper coins that clink together as they are placed into the national bank.

The clinking of those coins sound like an alarm sounding to Jesus. Alarming because this is another victim of the corruption -another widow being devoured- one who feels the need to give all she has to live on. She does this and the scribes don't even notice, perhaps nobody would've noticed as it was just the way things were. This woman had been all but abandoned by the world she lives in. The ones whose job it was to protect her, like the Scribes, devoured all she had to

maintain the status quo of the current system. Who were the Scribes? It's hard to know for sure, it was a long time ago and history doesn't leave us with many details. We do know they were important individuals. The title, Scribe, is one that could have been used to cover a variety of offices from the "local scribe" who would copy documents, to government and public officials who were invested with serious responsibilities.

The scribes were public figures that had become embedded in the culture of first century Judea. They had celebrity status and were highly favored in society. Their behavior reinforced the patterns of the corrupt system. They wore clothing that was symbolic of social power. They sought the best seats in public so others would notice them. They offered long prayers and speeches to show how holy and special they were. They maintained their status by relying on the taxes paid to the temple by even the poorest of the poor. Hardly flattering words that Jesus has for the Scribes.

And in hearing these words from Jesus, the disciples would have been surprised. After all, this was the way things were. The Scribes were meant to carry on in this way while ones like the widow managed to escape notice -were forgotten and abandoned. Why even the widow herself may not even have been aware of the full extent of this abandonment. Yet Jesus was aware, he noticed and he remembered her. He hoped for her even when the world she lived in seemed to do otherwise.

You know, there are a lot of people in this world who feel as if they have been abandoned. Many who feel as if they do not belong. Ones who feel they are a part of a system and a society that has forgotten them and no longer hopes in them. Just a couple of weeks ago I was having a conversation with a man who was reflecting on the changes that were taking place at his work, what was going on in his home life and just where he saw himself in relation to the world around

him, with what he saw on television, what kinds of lifestyles were being promoted. He compared how he himself struggled to live given all that he had been taking in. He looked at me and said with lament in his voice, "I feel like I am at a point in my life where I feel less and less like I belong." This man was beginning to experience a sense of abandonment in his life. And I said earlier, these personal experiences of abandonment, they happen all of the time, they are going on all around us. I'm sure you experience them in your own life. We all do sooner or later.

They happen en masse too. If there is one thing we should truly lament as we look on helplessly at the presidential election in the United States, it is this, a great number of American citizens feel helpless too. There are many Americans who will consciously choose not to vote on Tuesday because they feel as if somehow their nation's electoral system and political machine has abandoned them. They do not feel as if any of the candidates represent them have their best interests in mind. There are many in the U.S. who feel as if they have been left behind by ones who seek to pursue a different agenda, and represent different ideals and values.

To me this is what war does. Be it through actual violent conflict or the propaganda and half-truths that disseminates from the different parties in election campaigns, this is what war does. Humanity can end up forsaken and if not forsaken then definitely downgraded for ideas and values and systems. We build temples of nationalist visions or cultural supremacy, while the human side is abandoned or diminished. The actual price people pay through personal loss, injustice, and lack of representation or relationship with the ruling authorities matters not.

A part of the problem is that we just fail to see another way. It's like the story of a young boy, who had just been rounded up by his mother and was about to be punished for throwing a rock at another child. The boy's mother inquired of her child while scolding him saying, "Why did you

throw that rock? Why didn't you just come to me?" The boy responded to his mother, "Because my aim is better than yours!" Yet that is so often the problem with how we respond and react and live in this world, we fail to see another way and in the process people become abandoned, forgotten, forsaken. We do not or are not willing to turn to God, we appeal to the same old systems to save us.

You know, when we think back to what brought about the Second World War as the Nazi's rose to power in the thirties, it was political aims and cultural domination that ruled the day. People and individuals were abandoned whether they knew it or not. They were forsaken whether they realized it or not for the good of the state and political hegemony. We realize it all these years later, we who have the luxury of looking back and remembering the losses of millions of human lives that came as a result.

Even for our own armed forces, for those whose names we remember, for those who have fought bravely, for those who have sacrificed so much, we should be careful. As we think of rows of white crosses and grave markers we should be careful when we say for what these people fought. For I believe they did not fight en masse strictly for their country or for some elusive political aspirations. There is something else here, these people were ultimately fighting to live. They were fighting to live and they were fighting for others to live.

My friends, I believe we are called to remember because we need to remember that these individual men and women fought for you to live and they fought for me to live. We need to remember that they fought for families, for loved ones. They fought to protect their buddy next to them. Even when they didn't belong there in the midst of a bloody war. They belonged in other places, raising families, enjoying life, living in peace, that's where they belonged. Instead, like that

widow on the temple steps, they ended up in places they didn't belong giving up all they had. We need to remember this so we do not abandon or forsake them. Lest we forget...right? Lest we forget them, lest we forget that widow in the temple and the hope Jesus had for her as we find ourselves in a world where politics and agendas and ideologies become more important than actual human beings. You see my friends, when we forget the human element we cheat one another of a greater hope.

Back in 1934 there were a group of Christians in Germany who believed this very same thing and did not want to forget. When many were affirming Hitler as a type of Messiah and saw politics and nationalism as all that mattered, a group of German pastors led by people like Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, risked their lives and dared to speak out against the authorities when they came together to sign a document called the Barmen Declaration. I believe that as we look back on history, the act of those pastors was one of the most courageous and hopeful we will ever discover. Bonhoeffer was himself executed by his own government just days before the war ended after a prolonged captivity. Article five of the Declaration stated the following. It said, *"We reject the false doctrine that beyond its special commission the State should and could become the sole and total order of human life and so fulfill the vocation of the Church as well."* The authors of the Barmen Declaration knew that more was needed besides political sentiments or some state sanctioned religion. The state will never be the savior of the people. They knew the need for and believed in a God that was independent and transcendent of any political or social system. The church comes to us out of God's mercy, grace and as the body of Christ is meant to embody hope for all humanity.

I found this same line of thought echoed in a piece I recently read by Erick Erickson. Erick Erickson is a conservative talk show host and columnist in the United States. Early on in the

Republican primaries, was a vocal opponent of Donald Trump. For this he and his family were ostracized in many places including his children, even at school and church. During this time, both he and his wife were diagnosed with terminal illnesses and had to deal with angry Trump protestors on their front lawn. Back in mid-October, faced with he and his wife's illnesses and the circus side show that had become the U.S. Presidential campaign, Erickson wrote a column to his children that was titled, "If I Die Before You Wake." I wish I had the time to read the whole thing to you, because I believe it is masterful, thoughtful and deeply faithful." But in the interests of time, I will read an excerpt. Erickson writes,

While I could write a book on what I would want my children to know if their mother and I died before they woke up tomorrow, there is one point more worth writing here.

When Christ draws near, the systems of man and nature collapse. When faith grows strong, it conflicts more and more with politics and polite society...

When Christ draws near, the systems we put in place collapse because they are the systems of sinners exposed by Christ's perfection. I want my children to know this. I want them to remember it. Because as they go through this fallen world there will be so much pressure on them, as there is on their parents, to conform to the world. And they must not be afraid to stand for the collapse of all things so that the one thing that truly matters stands tall.

My faith and politics are more and more irreconcilable. What matters more to me now is to do what I think is right, not to do what is popular. It is not to lead others, but to speak for those who cannot speak and do for others what they cannot do. I am no leader. I am just blessed with a platform where I say what I think is right and true and make sure those who agree know they are not alone.

The world wants believers to be alone and if my wife and I die before my children wake, they will feel alone and helpless in the world. So they must know Truth on the cross. That truth can guide them when I cannot and sustain them when I cannot and comfort them when I cannot.

My friends, those are powerful words, those are hopeful words. Words that reflect the faith of Jim that day he was floating in the gulf of St. Lawrence. They reflect the faith of those German Pastors who wrote the Barmen declaration. They reflect the hope that Christ embodied for all

humanity including that lonely widow. May this be the hope we practice as a church which is the hope in a God who will remember us.