

2018 11 11 – Peace

Mark 12:38-44

Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration and they are spending some time at the temple. Just the day before Jesus had driven out the buyers and the sellers from that same temple. So Jesus knows that the leaders of the temple are not pleased with his presence. In fact, the chief priests, the religious scholars and the elders have been asking Jesus questions since he arrived trying to get him to say something to incriminate himself.

At one point Jesus' sits down for a rest. From where he is sitting, Jesus is able to see the collection box and to watch all the people who come to put money into it. This is, of course, money that will be used for the running of the temple: the care of the building and the salaries of the priests and the scribes. Jesus, from his vantage point, can even see how much is being given. He watches several rich people come in and place large sums of money in the box. And then he notices a poor widow entering the sacred space and watches as she drops two small coins in the box, the equivalent of a penny.

When she is leaving, Jesus calls his disciples to come and he says to them, "The truth is, this woman has put in more than all who have contributed to the treasury; for they have put in money from their surplus, but she has put in everything she possessed from the little she had – all that she had to live on."

Jesus is obviously impressed with this woman's generosity. He has invited his disciples over so they will also be aware of her gift. What an amazing offering that she has given for the work of the temple and thus, we hope, for God's work.

As many of you know this a favourite passage for Stewardship Sunday. In fact, I used it here at First United just three years ago. It's offers clergy a wonderful opportunity to speak about the importance of giving generously.

But this isn't Stewardship Sunday, is it? We're here to talk about peace... what has this reading got to do with peace?

Let's go back and look at that first paragraph... the one most ministers like to ignore and for good reason. In it, Jesus is not very kind to religious leaders. He tells the people, "Beware of the religious scholars who like to walk about in long robes, be greeted obsequiously in the market squares, and take the front seats in synagogues and the places of honour at banquets." I have to admit, obsequious is not a part of my regular vocabulary, so I looked it up. It means, "subservient, attentive to an excessive degree." Jesus is talking about clergy who put on airs and like to be treated as if they are the Pope or the Queen.

And it gets worse! Jesus says, "These are the ones who swallow the property of widows and offer lengthy prayers for the sake of appearances. They will be judged all the more severely." Jesus was not one to mince words. He knew that he was already in trouble with the Jewish authorities and he kept on telling his truth. You see Jesus may have praised the widow for her generosity, but with the

same words he was condemning the religious leaders for their love of money and power. He was condemning a religious system that would allow a poor widow to give all that she had to the temple's general fund. In fact, in the next verse, just past today's reading, Jesus predicts the downfall of the temple, not just its leaders, but the physical structure itself. He says, "See these great buildings? Not a single stone will be left on another. Everything will be torn down" (Mark 13:2).

Jesus spent his ministry trying to open the eyes of his followers to the systemic injustices that were a part of the society in which he lived. It didn't matter if that injustice existed in his own religious organization, in the rural village where he was raised, or in the towns and cities of Judea. Jesus condemned the rich and the powerful because of their treatment of the poor and the marginalized. He condemned the Roman emperor and his governors for their oppressive taxes, he condemned the wealthy landowners for their excessive lending rates, and he condemned the religious leaders for their greed and hypocrisy.

On this Remembrance Day, on this 100th anniversary of the end of World War I, it is important for us to remember why wars get started in the first place. In an academic paper from Stanford University, written nine years ago, the authors noted that war happens because people want more. War happens because our leaders believe that through war they will gain resources, power, glory, territory, etc. War is caused by greed and the need for more power, or fame. The authors of the paper argued that If the people involved are rational they go to war only if they believe what will be gained outweighs the costs involved. As we all

know, as our soldiers know only too well, the cost of war is the loss of both property and human life. Our leaders who choose to go to war weigh the loss of life itself against the resources, the power, the glory or the territory that is to be gained. <https://web.stanford.edu/~jacksonm/war-overview.pdf>

You may be able to find examples of wars that were fought for other reasons but the majority are all about money and power. Many leaders use fear of the other to try to justify war but if you dig deep enough the base cause is nearly always selfishness and greed. When our focus is on getting more and more and more then it's nearly always true that someone else is getting less and less and less.

Jesus taught us that peace and justice go hand in hand. In order to create a truly peaceful world we must share what we have so that everyone will have enough. We must live in a sustainable way so that we not using more than our share of the resources of the earth. We must care for the widows, for those on the margins, for those who are unable to care for themselves. If, like the temple priests, we spend our time building our own little empire, then someone is just going to come along and tear it down.

If we are to reach God's day of peace then we have to be able to recognize when we have enough. If we are to reach God's day of peace then we have to be willing to share our surplus so that everyone around us will have what they need to live and to thrive. May it be so. Amen.