

Date: November 8, 2015
Scriptures: Psalm 101; Mark 12:38-42
Title: Our Heart's Orientation

Tenderness and kindness
are not signs of weakness and despair
but manifestations of strength and resolution.
Kahlil Gibran

The disciples don't realize it,
realize that Jesus' death is fast approaching.
Perhaps, we don't realize
that we are drawing near the end
of the Christian year.
Nevertheless, both are true.
The end is fast approaching.
For the disciples and all who love him,
these are the last few days of Jesus' life.
He has come to Jerusalem
in an effort to reform
the practices and behaviors
of the religious leaders.
To accomplish this, Jesus meets
them on their own turf,
in the Temple.
There, he actively disrupts Temple practices,
debates with the religious leaders,
and teaches the people.
He also has time to engage in his favorite pastime,
the observation of people.
Jesus is an astute observer of people.
He knows that we reveal much about ourselves
through our actions.
Knows that we are living human documents.
(Anton T. Bosen).

What he observes in the Temple
confirms what he has seen
as he traveled across the countryside

preaching, teaching and healing.

Far too many of the religious leaders
have strayed from God's word.

God's word says that the religious leaders
are to tend to God's people ~

to shepherd them as a shepherd tends his flock,
to feed them,
to help the weak, the widows and the orphans,
to rescue them from danger,
to reduce, not increase, their burden,
to lead them toward,
not away, from God.

(Jer. 23:1-4, Ezek. 34:18-21, Isaiah 1:23).

These are God's instructions to the religious leaders
concerning their responsibilities for God's people.

The instructions are crystal clear.

Yet, repeatedly throughout Israel's history,
the religious leaders fail to obey God's instructions.

When they do, God raises up prophets,
people like Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel,
to remind them of their holy work,
and to call them to recommit
to their sacred task.

This is what Jesus is doing

when he tells his disciples and the people to

"... watch out for the religious leaders,
who love to walk around in academic gowns,
preening in the presence of public flattery,
basking in prominent positions,
sitting at the head of . . . church functions.
. . . (These religious leaders) exploit the weak and helpless.

The longer their prayers the worse they get."
(Mark 12:38-40).

Jesus is urging the people to be on their guard

against religious leaders, who say one thing and do another
and not only be on their guard against them

but also to guard against becoming like them.

Perhaps, as Jesus sits there in the Temple,
observing the people,

one particularly arrogant religious leader
catches his attention.

Perhaps, Jesus notices the disdain on the man's face
as he carefully walks around the poor and needy.

Perhaps, Jesus sees the exaggerated
tilt of the man's head
whenever he meets a religious leader
a little lower down on the totem pole.

Perhaps, Jesus observes the man's arrogance
as he tosses heavy coin by heavy coin
into the treasury
and proudly calls out its value.

AND, perhaps, Jesus sees
not just one religious leader doing these things
but many religious leaders doing them.

Surely, something happened
to prompt Jesus to warn the people
against some of the religious leaders.

Like countless prophets before him,
Jesus comforts the afflicted
and afflicts the comfortable.

He does this,
because he knows
the comfortable and the afflicted
are inexorably bound together.

We are all bound together
by the bonds of our common humanity
and our mutual impact on one another.

Religious leaders are also bound
to those entrusted to their care
by their responsibility to shepherd them.

Yet, some religious leaders
are seduced by the temptations
of power, prestige and position.

Jesus knows this.

Knows they put themselves,
rather than God and others at the center of life,
and by doing this, betray their sacred trust.

Their betrayal has two forms ~
they fail to shepherd the people
and also expect the people to give sacrificially
while they themselves will not and do not.

While Jesus is warning the people to beware
some of the religious leaders,
he notices a widow enter the Temple
and sees she is very poor.

A beggar, she is dependent
on the kindness of others,
living hand to mouth,
hanging onto life by a thread.

She has no power, no prestige, no position.

Yet, she has a humble dignity about her.

She seems to know
that the circumstances of her life
do not define her ~
to know that she is defined
by the choices she makes
and the way she lives.

This sense of self comes
from her relationship with God
and enables her to live
each day with courage and hope.

It is her courage and hope that allow her
to make a choice you and I might consider foolish.

She throws all she has,
two small copper coins,
into the treasury.

They hardly make a sound.

Now, this widow,
this woman living on the very edge of existence,
is no body's a fool.

Her station in life gives her plenty of time

to sit and watch people,
to observe them closely day after day,
to see how they act
when they think no one is looking.

She sees it all ~

their pride and arrogance and hard-heartedness;
their humility and meekness and compassion;
their fear and hurt and pain.

Observing people closely,

she sees beyond the mask they wear,
sees them in all their glory and all their gore.

No fool, she realizes

that some of the religious leaders have strayed far
from what God would have them do.

She does not condone what they .

In fact,

like the prophet Jesus,
she has been critical of them
when they used their position
to enrich themselves
at the expense of people like her.

Still, on this day,

she chooses to give all she has to God.

Perhaps a prayer was answered

or someone gave her bread for the day
or

Whatever her motivation,

this day she gives all she has to God.

Seeing her, Jesus knows her gift

reveals the orientation of her heart.

This widow,

this poor woman,

this beggar of the street

chooses God above all else,

aligns herself with something beyond herself
and trust her gift will manifest itself

beyond what it is,

two small copper pennies.

Although I along with countless other pastors
have used this passage to preach about stewardship,
one pastor says it has absolutely nothing
to do with it.

Rather, she says,

“It’s about something
(far) more important than stewardship.

It’s about the orientation of the heart”

(Karoline Lewis, “Working Preacher,” 11.8.15).

Jesus uses these two stories

to describe two ways of living in the world.

One way is to live with our hearts

oriented toward ourselves,

to put ourselves at the center of life.

The other way is to live with our hearts

oriented toward God.,

to put God at the center of our lives.

The first way shrinks our life

and the lives of those around us.

The second way expands our life

and the lives of others.

Clearly, Jesus is urging us to orient our hearts to God.

While this passage is not about stewardship,

it is a flashing light pointing to stewardship.

Jesus says,

“Where your treasure is, there also is your heart.”

Since this is the stewardship season,

I ask you,

“Where is your treasure?”

In a similar vein,

I ask you to think about

what this church and its ministry means to you.

Its ministry of education of children and adults;

its ministry of worship and praise and song;

its ministry of providing pastoral care

for people within and outside the community;

its ministry of mission outreach.

Just as it takes a village to raise a child,

it takes a community of people working together
for a church to be the church.

The session, April, the Sunday school teachers, and I
cannot do it by ourselves.

We need each of you to love this church
and to offer your treasure, your time, your talent
in support of it.

What happens
in this church and to this church
is dependent on the orientation of all our hearts. Amen.