

Sermon
November 11, 2018
Proper 27B/Veteran's Day
The Rev. Gary R Brower, PhD

Ruth 3.1-5; 4.13-17
Psalm 127
Hebrews 9.24-28
Mark 12.38-44

From Mark's Gospel, "As [Jesus] taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes . . . and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets" (38-39). So, today is one of those Sundays most preachers dread, especially those of us from liturgical traditions, like the Episcopal, Catholic, Lutheran or Orthodox churches. It makes many of us wish to preach in clean-the-house clothes, and to sit somewhere in the middle of the congregation, or maybe the back! Of course, that fear is a bit mis-placed, largely because of the misunderstanding about what a "scribe" actually did. Because of the frequent association of "scribes" with the "Pharisees" in some passages in the Gospels, many have assumed that "scribes" were clergy, or at least religious folks, an assumption that isn't always correct. In the ancient world, "scribes" were simply those who were literate, that is, who could read and write (since less than 10% of the population could). So, they read and recorded contracts, bills of sale, correspondence, etc. AND they could read . . . let's say, Scripture, as well as governmental edicts. So there's good reason for them to be around the religious / political leaders, and, therefore, to feel a bit puffed-up. At least this is the interpretation I like, since it gets me off the hook in this passage.

But, there's another reason why this Sunday is a bit tricky for preachers, especially given that this passage often falls during "stewardship season". Indeed, the account of Jesus' observation of the goings-on at the Temple treasury box probably makes most of us a bit uncomfortable. I imagine many of us have heard sermons, based on this reading, about the contrast between "making our pledge" from what's left over as opposed to giving "sacrificially". And those "lessons" seem to trigger an internalized guilt mechanism that causes us to squirm in our seats as we struggle with that argument. I have no intention of appealing to that kind of reasoning! I don't believe that is what stewardship is all about. More importantly, I do think there's something more significant going on than simply what one does with one's currency.

Jesus saw a widow at the Temple treasury box, in addition to those with "treasure". Widows in the ancient middle-eastern world were in a very precarious position. Without a husband, in many cases they were also without any means of support. That's the reason why they are so often included in the biblical lists of those, along with orphans, who ought be cared for by the community. Not having a dad or a husband in a patriarchal society put both widows and orphans on the very edges of the community, relying on the good will of others. Widows Ruth and Naomi were dependent on others. They had little hope except that Ruth could glean behind the reapers, that is, pick up whatever was left over in the fields. Naomi (Ruth's widowed mother-in-law), unable to continue caring for Ruth "[sought] some security for [her] , so that it may be well with [her]", or, from another translation, " to see [her] happily settled" (3.1). And, through a very ingenious scheme, she succeeded in getting Ruth married to Boaz (a kinsman), ensuring Ruth's security — as well as a male child to carry on Naomi's husband's lineage. It's a

complicated story, to say the least, but one thing is at the base: both Ruth and Naomi were in need.

Significant “need” is a fact of life for the widows in the reading from Mark as well. The scribes’ “devouring of the widows’ houses” (12.40) wasn’t a significant act unless there wasn’t much of a “house” to devour in the first place. And, of course, the seriousness of the act was underscored by the contrast of that practice with their appearances, but absence, of true piety. Mark then tells us of a specific widow, the one who came to the Temple treasury. We don’t know what intention she, or the “rich people” had for their giving, as there were a number of donation boxes at the Temple, but we are told that the widow, with her two small coins, gave an immense gift, dwarfing those of all the wealthy. The comparison Jesus made, despite many sermons to the contrary, is NOT about proportionality. Jesus was making the same point that he often made: to follow him, we need to give our whole selves, or to use another of Jesus’ analogies, we need to take up our cross to follow him (Mk 8.34). The widow humbles most of us because she does just that; she goes “all in.” Jesus hammered home this point: “She out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on” (12.44). The implication being it was her last act; the rest was in the hands of God.

I see an echo of this in the first part of our psalm this morning as well. “Unless the LORD builds the house, their labor is in vain who build it. . . . It is in vain that you rise so early and go to bed so late; vain, too, to eat the bread of toil, for he gives to his beloved sleep” (127.1, 3). “What”, the psalmist seems to ask, “is behind the actions we undertake?” Is it to be “greeted with respect in the marketplaces . . . to have the best seats in worship . . . or places of honor at banquets?” (Mark 12.38, 39). Or is it to put God at the center of our actions, to put God at the center of the “house” that we seek to build, or, in the case of the widow, to give everything up, trusting that God will see us through? To put God at the center of all we undertake is probably the most difficult demand Jesus, indeed the entire Bible, makes of us. Yet, given the promise of the biblical message, in that relinquishment, in that death, is found our life.

Questions of life and death . . . and the underlying, paralyzing, fear of the latter, often calls to mind for me an episode in the mini-series “Band of Brothers”, based on the history of a parachute regiment during World War Two. In this particular episode, one of the soldiers, named “Blythe”, suffered an extreme panic attack after his parachute jump into Normandy, a fear that resulted in temporary blindness. After being comforted in the aid station by his commanding officer, his sight returned . . . and he returned to duty. In a conversation with his direct superior, he confessed his fear. His lieutenant told him, “Blythe, we’re all afraid. But we have to accept the fact that we’re already dead. That’s the only way to be a good soldier.” That comment made a huge impact on Blythe, so much so, that when the lieutenant asked for a volunteer to “take point” on a patrol into a potential engagement, Private Blythe volunteered.

There’s something about being “all in” that allows for a relinquishment of a lot of lesser concerns. Being “all in” for the Anabaptists I mentioned last week may lead to loss of home, or life. Being “all in”, as I mentioned, too, last week, led one of my uncles to choose the route of conscientious objector during World War Two. One of my uncle’s brothers — that is, my dad — interpreted being “all in” in a quite different way: he enlisted. He enlisted in the Army and eventually found his way into, at least, one of the same battles as the regiment from “Band of Brothers”: the Battle of the Bulge. That choice of enlistment on his part puzzled me for a while

as I was growing up; he was part of a pacifist church, after all. When I finally mustered up the courage to ask him about how he could square his pacifist beliefs with his enlistment, he had a simple answer: "Hitler was different; evil was in the world and needed to be stopped." And he went "all in".

Perhaps not describing everyone who has served, "all in" does describe most veterans, who, on this day we remember and honor. Indeed, on this day, November 11, 100 years ago, the root of Veterans' Day — Armistice Day or Remembrance Day — the root was planted in the signing of the Armistice that ended World War 1, the "War to End All Wars". As most of us know, it was on "the eleventh hour, of the eleventh day, of the eleventh month" that the buglers played "Stand Fast", that is, cease fire. The carnage which had turned much of Europe into a wasteland was over. The precise anniversary of that moment will occur in _____.

And, while it may be liturgically, and theologically problematic, we will observe a longer moment of silence at the Fraction — when the bread is broken — not only to recall Christ's self-sacrifice on our behalf, but also for the anniversary of the end of World War one, and in honor of those who've gone "all in" for their country, from World War One's fly-boys and doughboys, to World War Two's Private Blythe, Lieutenant Robert Brower and Marine Private Richard Bailey; for those who served in Korea, Vietnam and Middle East, and for those in this congregation who've pledged to serve this country.

I happen to own the miniseries "Band of Brothers". I watch it at least once a year. I find many war movies strangely compelling, but not because of the "action". I find, in them, a metaphor or parable, about the human condition — what I've just termed being "being all in". Questions are raised about morality and commitment, about where one's values truly lie. In asking my dad "Why fight?" I was asking much the same question, and he gave me his answer: his action was based in the struggle against evil, and for justice — a very Christ-like thing. Just as a Christ-like commitment to non-violence was at the basis of Dad's brother's decision to conscientiously object.

"All in" is not just about taking up arms; our widow at the Temple in Mark's gospel shows us that. Indeed, the Prophet Mohammed told his followers, after a particularly significant battle at the birth of Islam, that they had just finished the "lesser *ji*had" — that is, battle with others, and were about to engage in the "greater *ji*had" — that is, the internal battle about where one's true allegiance lies, or, to play to the root meaning of the word "Islam": total submission to God.

"Submission" was Ruth's response to Naomi's suggestions as to how to save both of their lives. "Total submission" was the widow's commitment when she gave the "two small coins", all she had into the temple treasury. "Total submission" is what we expect of our bravest service men and women. And, "total submission" lies at the root of our concept of stewardship; "Unless the Lord builds the house, their labor is in vain who build it" (Ps 127.1). I find the words from the middle of Rite One's Eucharistic Prayer 1 to be more challenging than any of their counterparts in Rite Two: "And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable holy, and living sacrifice unto thee" (BCP, 336).

Amen.