

November 10, 2024
Called Out in Faith
The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

My Grandpa Thor was one of five children and the only boy in his family.

Of his four sisters, three of them married Lutheran pastors.

In a way, you could say, I went into the family business.

I've heard stories that one of those pastors, my great uncle Herb, when asked to give the blessing at a meal, whether it was a holiday or other family gathering, would give the *longest* prayers

I've also heard that Herb didn't do this to show some sort of great piety or ability to give eloquent prayers – no, apparently he did this so you wouldn't ask him again!

I hear it worked!

Thankfully there were a few others who were equally as qualified to offer the prayer, oh and those other pastors were around, too

I am wearing Herb's stole this morning and I have some vestments from the other uncles as well

They passed down some of the tools of their ministries to some of my mom's cousins who became pastors and those cousins have passed down many of them to me

They also passed down a faith that has grounded and shaped our family for generations

The Lutheran Church may have been the state religion in Sweden where my ancestors came from, but to my relatives, being Lutheran was also a

way of life that valued service to others, unceasing love for our family and for those in our communities, generosity, and gratitude

It's an inheritance that I'm awfully grateful for

What is the faith we've all inherited? And how do we know we are following it faithfully?

This is kind of the kernel of the conflict and lesson from Jesus in this morning's gospel reading

For context, this pericope takes place in the city of Jerusalem after Jesus has entered on a donkey (the day we celebrate as Palm Sunday) and just days before his trial and execution

Since entering the city, Jesus has done nothing but criticize and challenge the religious and political leaders in Jerusalem - and, he's not subtle at all

Him entering on a donkey to shouts of "Hosanna!" was meant to juxtapose and mock the parades of warriors that would accompany the entrance of the Roman leader into Jerusalem

Remember the story of Jesus flipping over the tables in the temple - yup, that's one of the stories in this timeframe

And then we get this observation in this morning's text: "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

Yeah, like I said, not subtle at all.

The story goes on, Jesus and his friends sit down in the temple where they can see the treasury – the place where the faithful would make their offerings to the temple

“Many rich people put in large sums.” But then, “a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then 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. For 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.’”

This part of the story is why this pericope is often referred to as the lesson of the “the Widow’s mite” and often times this widow is lifted up as a model of generosity, an example of faithfulness – even though those rich folks are giving large sums, how much more meaningful is it that this widow gives *all* that she has, isn’t she remarkable

It’s understandable that this is an interpretation of this text, especially when it typically falls during churches’ stewardship campaigns

But, I’m sorry Stewardship Committee, this does not seem to be what Jesus was trying to tell us

As Debie Thomas points out in her reflection on this week’s text, “Jesus never commends the widow, applauds her self-sacrifice, or invites us to follow in her footsteps. He simply notices her, and tells his disciples to notice her, too.”¹

And what is it we are to notice?

Sung Soo Hong, a theologian out of Louisville, KY, agrees with Debie when he writes: “The Jesus I know does not ask the destitute to squeeze themselves to the last drop to serve God. Rather, Jesus comforts and

¹ <https://journeywithjesus.net/essays/2003-out-of-her-poverty>

blessees them. He condemns the rich and the powerful who exploit the poor.”²

Rather than a commendation, this is a condemnation

You see, Hong goes on to say that “if the leaders had kept the Law” of their ancestors, the law of the faith, “and feared God, who is portrayed as the ultimate defender of widows in many passages of the Hebrew Bible, the widow in our passage would have not become that poor. The widow’s extreme poverty is the evidence that the leaders have failed.”

The widow’s extreme poverty is evidence that the leaders have failed.

Beware the scribes – and if you need any evidence that what I am saying is true, just look at what has become of this widow

If these scribes are the inheritors of the faith of our ancestors, you’d never know it.

What they value is not what God values.

What they focus on is not what God has called us to focus on.

“Should we cheer or weep in the face of this story?” Debie Thomas asks.

“Or — here’s a third alternative — should we call out (as Jesus did) any form of religiosity that manipulates the vulnerable into self-harm and self-destruction? Any form of piety that privileges long-winded prayers over works of compassion and liberation? Any version of Christianity that valorizes soul-killing suffering as redemptive? Any practice of faith that coddles us into apathy in the face of economic, racial, sexual, and political injustice?”

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-32-2/commentary-on-mark-1238-44-7>

Jesus did not restrict his criticism to the temple, but also called out the political and societal leaders of his time and Debie's observations could apply here too:

should we call out (as Jesus did) any form of politics that manipulates the vulnerable into self-harm and self-destruction? Any form of government that privileges long-winded speeches over works of compassion and liberation? Any version of society that valorizes soul-killing suffering as redemptive? Any practice of our culture that coddles us into apathy in the face of economic, racial, sexual, and political injustice?

I have come to see that "calling out" is an act of grace and not solely an act of judgment, as uncomfortable as it might feel when we are called out

It's an invitation to take off my lenses of privilege or apathy or easiness and to take in the world as others experience it

It's an opportunity to realign myself with my values and to choose how I want to be in this world as a Christian – as an inheritor of the faith that my family passed down to me and the bigger tradition which we all share

We *are* the inheritors of this faith and how do we know that we are living it faithfully?

From where we sit, what do we observe? In our church and in our world?

From where we sit, what do we need to call out?

And, not just call out, but also repair, restore, and rebuild?

What about relationships with those we consider "other" from ourselves?

What about our relationship with money, wealth, prestige, and power?

What about the widows, the orphans, and the sojourners of our day?

Do we embody a faith that if Jesus came back and sat over there and observed us he would commend us or condemn us?

I'm not a hellfire and brimstone preacher, I don't mean to strike fear

But I do want to join Jesus in calling out the injustices.

And, I do desire to embody the faith that Jesus has called me as a disciple to embody.

That is our Christian calling – That is our baptismal calling

It's a calling that reaches back 2,000 years – and it's a calling that will propel us forward and inspire us into the future we may not fully be able to grasp

So yes, consider that widow's mite – consider what it is our society asks of the most vulnerable

Consider how our actions and the actions of those with the most power and influence impact them

Consider what you and I could do if we were to be called out by Jesus for how we have devoured the humanity of our peers

And consider that the conviction that we feel in our hearts is a holy invitation

An invitation to care

An invitation to serve

An invitation to be generous

An invitation to reorient around the teachings and practices of the faith we truly did inherit - the way of love, grace, mercy, forgiveness, and justice.

I wear my great uncle's stole and it reminds me of where I've come from, the responsibility I hold in my calling, and the love that surrounds me in my journey

In baptism we put on the mantle of Christ – let it remind us of the faith tradition we come from and may we endeavor to live that tradition steadfastly, knowing always the love and grace that buoy us on our journey.

Thanks be to God, amen.