

Highs and Lows
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Bruton Parish Church – Williamsburg, VA
Proper 27, November 11, 2018
Mark 12:38-44

Anyone who's participated in a group led by Deacon Jan or myself knows that we always begin with highs and lows. We go around the room and invite each person there to share something that's going well and something that's not going well. It brings everyone's voice into the room and allows us to know what's going on with each other, what's alive for each person present there that day.

We don't have time to do highs and lows for everyone here this morning. So, I'll just mention a few that are on my mind and may be on yours. I'm going to start with the lows: the shooting that claimed 12 lives at the Borderline Bar and Grill in Thousand Oaks, California, the fires that have taken homes, lives, and whole towns in both southern and northern California, and the continued hostility in our country's public discourse and politics.

Highs have included seeing the bags for the Thanksgiving food drive coming in, a win for William and Mary this weekend, and the large number of voters who turned out for the mid-term elections. Whether your candidate won or lost, I'm betting that a high for most of us since Tuesday has been the end of campaign ads.

There are also some historical highs and lows that we're remembering this weekend. Friday night marked a true low, the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht, the night in 1938 when a pogrom was carried out against the Jews in Germany, killing close to a hundred, destroying thousands of synagogues, cemeteries, and businesses, and sending 30,000 Jewish men to concentration camps.

An historical high is today, when we mark the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I. We'll be ringing the tower bells just prior to the 11:00 service as part of an international initiative to celebrate when the guns went silent after years of war.

Even Veterans Day is a combined high and low. A low that we have not yet as human beings discovered ways to live peacefully with each other, and so our world is still marred by war. A high as we recognize the men and women who have been willing to serve and risk their lives to protect their country.

I'm sure each of you have your particular highs and lows today as well.

On Tuesday at the end of the Recovery Bible Study that we hold every week at SpiritWorks, I asked one of our community members if she had any thoughts to share with us about today's gospel passage. She said, "Well, I just think Jesus was sharing his highs and lows."

As I looked back at the passage, I chuckled. Yes, indeed. Jesus started with his low: the pride of the religious leaders of his time, who lorded it over others, strutting around in fine garments and taking the best seats, devouring widow's houses, perhaps by convincing the women to give all they had to the temple.

Jesus ends with his high, turning his attention to one poor widow, among the crowds who are putting their offerings in the temple treasury. Many of them are making large contributions, but the one he points out to his disciples is the woman who puts in 2 small coins, a pittance, but all that she has.

Now there are two ways that this passage tends to be interpreted by people like me who wear long robes and stand in pulpits and have the best seats in the church. The first is to suggest that Jesus is holding up the poor woman with her two coins as an example for sacrificial giving, and that we need to do the same.

A second popular interpretation is to suggest that Jesus is criticizing the temple system of his time. According to Torah, the Jewish people were required to look after the poor, the widow, and the orphan. But these scribes aren't doing that. The poor widow shouldn't be in a place where she only has two coins to give because the very institution that she's giving them to should be taking care of her.

My guess is that Jesus is doing both things – lamenting that the system is unjust for the widow, the orphan, and the poor, *and* lifting up the poor woman's gift as more favorable than the gifts of others because of her willingness to give her all.

So what are we to do with this story? It seems unlikely that any of us are going to give everything we own to the church. As much as it's tempting to make this a stewardship sermon, I don't think Jesus pointed out the widow to his disciples in order to inspire or guilt his followers two thousand years later into giving more to the church. Of course it is good to give to the church!

Or perhaps we're supposed to be motivated to work for more just systems for the poor of our time. As Christians we're always supposed to be doing our part for those who have less than we do, for those who are oppressed for those who are on the margins. But I can't help wondering if there's another message here.

Jesus sees. He sees the Temple and its flaws. He sees the pride and the power of the scribes. He sees the crowd giving out of their abundance. He sees the widow. He sees her in her poverty. And he sees her giving everything she has. Just as he will give everything a few days down the road when he dies by the hand of the same systems and institutions that are oppressing her.

Out of all the people at the Temple that day, Jesus notices this woman and points her out so that the disciples will see her too. This particular person, in this particular place, making this particular offering.

Perhaps we're not called to be like the widow. Perhaps we are called to *see* the widow. Not as a generic "person over there" who needs our help or our pity. But as a fellow human being on this earth, another beloved child of God who deserves to be seen and known, just as we do. An individual person with needs and wants, with highs and lows. David Lose says, "Championing 'the poor' is one thing; knowing the name and taking the time to care about, a specific person who has very little is another thing all together."¹

Sisters and brothers, how many people a day do we pass by and not see?
How much of the violence and hatred and hurt and pain in this world is caused because people don't feel seen or heard?

We've all had times when we weren't seen or heard; it feels awful.
What can we do to make sure that we see and hear those whom we encounter? It doesn't take great wealth to do that.
It doesn't take power.

¹ David Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/11/pentecost-25-b-seeing-the-widow/>

It doesn't take influence.

It takes pausing our own headlong rush through life, looking away from all our distractions, lifting our heads up from our own needs and wants, in order to really see those around us. To listen to their highs and lows, to hear their struggles and their joys, to understand their particular needs and desires.

Jesus does that for us. He sees each one of us. Our flaws and gifts. Our pride and our poverty. Our needs and our wants. He sees us and loves us.

As Jesus' disciples, we are called to notice others.
See them. Hear them. Love them.

And then perhaps one day, our high every week will be hearing the ringing of the bells of peace instead of the guns of war.

The bells that call us to worship.

The bells that call us to freedom.

The bells that call us to the joy of walking with our Savior in the way of love.