

Sermon - 11/11/18
“Standing With the Forsaken”
Deuteronomy 10:12-22 and Mark 12:38-44
25th Sunday after Pentecost
Veteran’s Day
Davidson College Presbyterian Church - Davidson, NC
The Rev. Robert M. Alexander

Mrs. Porter already seemed ancient when I first met her. She had outlived most of her friends. Her husband had died years earlier. She lived by herself in the back of what had been her beauty salon on Main Street. She had been a gifted Beautician and people came from far away to have their hair done by Ms. Lily. She was a proud woman and she didn’t want to leave the place that had meant so much to her for so many years.

The shop and home had fallen into disrepair and many people wanted to see it cleaned up so as to spruce up Main Street a bit. Offers were made and pressure was applied, but Ms. Lily was adamant that she wanted to stay. I met her when my mom asked me to take some firewood to her. She couldn’t afford heat so she burned a little wood in a small stove in her tiny, dirty, cluttered living space behind the main part of her salon.

I don’t know what kind of relationship that she had with the local church or the local politicians, or law enforcement, or anyone else with any power in the town. All I know is that as a teenage boy I thought she was a sweet, little old lady that needed some help. She was all alone and it didn’t seem to me like there were too many people offering it.

Years later she was convinced to move into a retirement community against her wishes. Her place was torn down and redeveloped. She died a few years later.

Maybe there is someone like Ms. Lily that has been a part of your life...maybe a neighbor, a friend, or a family member. Maybe that is someone who you look after or who is cared for by someone else that you know. Or maybe it is someone who is taken advantage of, neglected, or forgotten.

I wonder who was looking after the widow in Mark’s text from this morning’s gospel reading. The root of the Greek word that is translated “widow” means “forsaken” or “left without” – as in “left without a husband.” But it was used broadly for any woman who was left alone in that culture. Mark tells us that the widow that day came to the Temple to give her offering, and that she gave all that she had. Had she done this of her own free will? Had she been asked to give this money to support a system that wasn’t living up to its calling to support the poor, oppressed, and marginalized?

Many have traditionally understood this text as a call to the church to sacrifice everything for the sake of the gospel. I don’t deny that I have often thought that the widow points us to Jesus who gave up everything for the sake of the world. But I wonder if there isn’t also a warning in the text for the church. Is Jesus pointing to a great injustice in society? Is the widow’s “giving of everything she has” just one more example of the scribes “devouring widow’s houses” that is mentioned earlier in the text?

Jesus called out the religious establishment, in this case the scribes, and described how they had not carried out their responsibilities within the community. Those with position, authority, and power, were charged with caring for the poor and marginalized. Instead, they were flaunting their position, seeking to gain more recognition, and using their power to further oppress the ones for whom they were to care.

Some scholars have pointed to the common practice of scribes serving as trustees or stewards of a widow’s affairs. Because women had so few rights, they needed a male to help them in legal and financial matters. Perhaps some of the scribes abused that privilege for their own gain.

The financial offerings given at the Temple were used to care for the property and for the religious leaders and laborers. I wonder if some of the scribes had abused their position and power to increase the offerings that were given by certain widows under their care.

I recently read a story about a similar abuse of power. A daily paper revealed that a well-known TV evangelist had written a letter to a widow in a nursing home asking for \$200. His appeal was that if she did not have the money, she should borrow it and then send it to him. The letter was called to the attention of a reporter who published it in the newspaper. The evangelist defended his action by claiming that God had instructed him to

send this letter to the widow. Unfortunately, the lady had been dead for three months.

(<https://bible.org/article/they-devour-widows-houses>)

Now – I know this isn't the kind of thing that the Stewardship Committee probably wants me to mention in the middle of Stewardship Season. We do, in fact, need the whole congregation to participate in giving to support the mission of the church. But let's be clear about one thing. That mission is something that we discern together, through prayer, through the reading of the Bible, through conversation, and through faith. There should never be an occasion where anyone feels like they are being forced, coerced, or manipulated to give beyond what they feel called to give by God. If someone doesn't agree with the mission of the church then it is their responsibility to say something about it. My personal belief is that our offerings should always be used, first and foremost, to love and serve those in need rather to lift ourselves up and to enrich our own lives.

Jesus spoke about the religious leaders. But he spoke *to* the **whole** church. And the church is made up of God's people that are in the world – working, teaching, serving, voting, and leading. Where – beyond the church walls - do we see abuses of power in our world? On the playground at school? In the home or in the classroom? On athletic fields and courts? In marriages and friendships? In offices and boardrooms? Where do we see those with position, influence, and power taking advantage of others – especially the poor and the marginalized? How many of the policy decisions that are made in Washington, Raleigh, Town Hall, or the corporate Board Room are made by people of faith who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ?

In discussing this with several of our mission partners I have discovered some interesting concerns among those who work with many of the groups the church is called to serve and love.

We have read in recent months that Charlotte is ranked 50th in the nation in terms of upward mobility. In other words, of the 50 largest metropolitan areas in the nation, it is the most difficult for someone from Charlotte to climb their way out of poverty. What is it about our system that creates such challenges? What could we, as God's people, be doing differently to help care for those who are poor and marginalized and help break these cycles of poverty? We help feed the hungry, house the homeless, and clothe the naked, but do we help change policy that makes it possible for the poor to get ahead? Do we allow those who are poorer the access they need to quality education, healthy food, and comprehensive health care? Do we place a higher percentage of the tax burden on their backs while at the same time keeping them from making a living wage? We may say – “We haven't done anything to cause this!” But have we done anything to stop it? Has our inaction contributed to the problem? How can we say we love our neighbor as ourselves when we, ourselves, would not want to live under such conditions or within such systems if we were in our neighbor's shoes – if they have any shoes at all?

This past week, Pamela Grundy came to speak here at the church. She spoke about her book Color and Character which traces the story of desegregation and re-segregation at West Charlotte High School. In her presentation and the discussion that followed there were important points about educational opportunity and about the lack of political will among many in power to create lasting policy changes that would enable those with less resources to access the education needed to help them break the poverty cycle.

Beyond education, those at the margins of our society are struggling with employment, housing, transportation, access to health care, and healthy affordable food options. They are exploited by lenders and pushed farther to the margins by those with money and power who don't want their property values negatively impacted.

Our communities are becoming less and less diverse and our thinking is becoming more and more limited by our desire to protect our own interests rather than looking to the interests of others.

You may remember a passage from Philippians where the Apostle Paul wrote to the church about the importance of this quality in the followers of Jesus. That, after all, is the model that he set for us... “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:6-8)

The Bible is full of example after example of the mandate to care for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger in the land. Instead, we see more and more examples of people, out of fear and ignorance, putting up barriers – physical barriers, psychological barriers, and policy barriers – that keep those who are at the biggest disadvantage from achieving a better and more fulfilling life.

Instead of welcoming the “tired and huddled masses”ⁱ we threaten to send troops to the border. Instead of creating more affordable housing opportunities in our community we make it impossible for people with lower incomes to live in places where they can access schools, jobs, food, and other resources. Instead of inviting those who look, sound or even believe differently from us to be part of our community, we push them away and become more and more uniform. We use our power, our influence, and our position to further divide, oppress, and marginalize.

I was talking with a long-time friend the other day who also happens to be a pastor. He thinks we need a hat that reads “Make America Greet Again.”

I mean – this really is so much about hospitality. The issue that Jesus had with the scribes is that they were full of themselves – worried about looking good and having the best seat in the house and being greeted by others. They should have been thinking less about themselves and more about the needs of others - taking time to greet others and care for them. And that is what we are all called to do.

Rodger Nishioka – former professor at Columbia Theological Seminary in reflecting on this passage from Mark wrote that “Readers of this text must reflect seriously upon their own complicity in current systems of violence and oppression. But reflection alone is not enough. Reflection must lead to specific and sustained action by engaging spiritual practices that challenge political and economic systems in the church, the nation, and the world. Feeding the hungry and providing clothing are important spiritual practices, but the church must come to view these practices as more than programs. The church must come to understand these practices as the very life flowing out of its worship. Further, the church must call all of society to care for the orphans, the widow, the resident alien, and the poor as its primary purpose, with all other governing and political functions as secondary. In this way, the church not only exhibits God’s righteousness but shapes a politic that is in itself righteous.”ⁱⁱ

Friends – we have more power than we realize. We have power because God has given it to us. Power to shape conversations. Power to reach out in love and lead by example. Power to challenge the status quo. Power to forgive and seek reconciliation. Power to give sacrificially and to serve those who are in need. Power to shift the attention from ourselves and onto those at the margins. We have the power to stand with those who are forsaken and forgotten. Indeed – we already are doing that in so many ways through so many wonderful partnerships with Ada Jenkins and Davidson Housing Coalition, and E2D, and Habitat for Humanity, and Room in the Inn, and Mooresville Soup Kitchen, and Children’s Hope Alliance, and Lily Pad Haven, and Caterpillar Ministries, and Blythe Elementary School. And while these partnerships allow us to connect with, love, and serve real people, they also teach us what needs to be done to enable larger change in our communities and world so that those at the margins are brought near, cared for, protected, and lifted up.

I don’t know how many people stood with Mrs. Porter. I don’t know how many advocates she had beyond my mom. I hope there were people to stand with her, to make sure she was treated fairly, cared for, and that her rights were protected. She needed others to speak up for her rather than have her voice and her home devoured by a system that was more interested in development than in her wellbeing.

My hope is that we will look for the ones who are in need of support and that we will stand with them, using our power to lift them up rather than further push them to the margins. We are called to do this in both small and large ways, but it begins with one person. Who is that one person for you? Could you find someone to visit? Someone who needs an advocate? May you be more interested in the needs of that one than your own. May that be the place you choose to stand.
To God be the Glory! Amen!

ⁱ Inscription at Statue of Liberty from the Emma Lazarus poem “The New Colossus.”

ⁱⁱ Nishioka in *Feasting on the Word: Year B*. p. 288