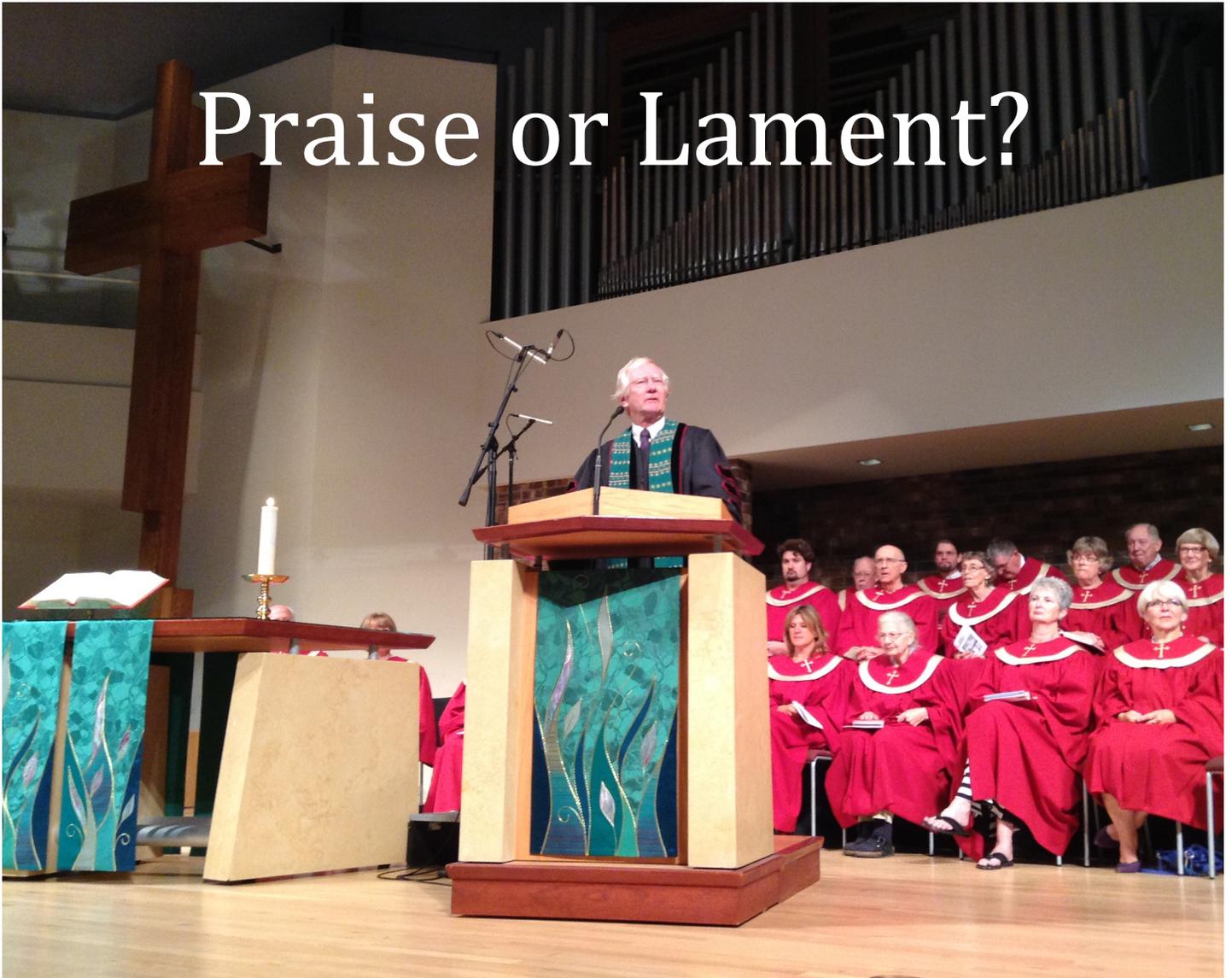


Rev. Phil Blackwell • November 8, 2015 • Sermon Text
Mark 12:38-44

Praise or Lament?



First United
Methodist Church

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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On our television at home we get 138 channels via satellite. I have watched something at one time or another on 24 of them; in a week's time I may turn intentionally to 12 of them, mainly for news, sports, and British murder mysteries. But last Tuesday night I took a "walk on the wild side" and clicked through the channels devoted to religion. There is a Jewish channel, a Roman Catholic channel, a Mormon channel, and several fundamentalist Christian channels, including one on which people were predicting the imminent end of the world, yet pleading for long-term financial gifts.

I was fascinated by one youngish man (compared in age to all of the others) making the case that we should send him \$500 right away as "seed money" so that God could produce a one hundred-fold harvest in our lives within 50 days. Send him \$500, and there is the 800 number at the bottom of the screen, and he would pray for us so that God would return to us an expected \$50,000 within two months. He told stories: the man who sent the last \$500 he had and within hours got a phone call out of the blue to hire him for a landscaping job. Another down on her luck person who sent \$500, stopped at the gas station, and had a stranger offer her a job. Yet another who sent in \$500 and then remembered that he had forgotten to call in a past-due payment from a client for \$20,000.

But we had to do it right now, because God's promise was certain only for the first 200 callers. Presumably, if we did not act fast enough, after 50 days when no hundred-fold harvest occurred, we would have to assume that we were caller 201. The next night, the same channel, a different man, and now the "seed money" required from us was \$1000, but the promise still was a one hundred-times harvest. But now, we had to be among the first 120 callers. He prayed earnestly for each one of us to send the money immediately so that we would see the promise of God's goodness right now, and then the show ended with the tiny logo telling us that it was recorded in 2012. This was not live; this was not urgent; this was not about us; he was not praying for you and me in our dire circumstances. It was a re-run, and probably so night after night after night. No wonder so many people in our society want nothing to do with the church if, when they sit at home late at night cruising the channels, this is what they see . . . it is lamentable.

Is this what Jesus was seeing as he sat and watched the people place their offerings in the collection box at the temple? Our episode from the Gospel of Mark is a very familiar one, and an endearing one, on an obvious level. A destitute widow places into the box all she owns, two small coins worth a penny in our calculation. Others before had put in a lot more, but they gave out of their surplus, it was pocket change to them, but she gave her entire fortune, as tiny as it was. And Jesus tells his disciples that she is more generous in her stewardship than all of the others.

The reading is only seven verses long, but it has two parts. The first three verses are a scathing condemnation of the scribes who use their station in life to bilk others of their livelihood, especially widows like the one we soon will see. Jesus is teaching in the temple; he is seated and has people gathered around to listen to him. "Watch out for the legal experts!" he exclaims, maybe even loudly enough for the scribes to hear him. This is not the beginning of a lawyer joke. Jesus was a great respecter of the law, as all Jews were. "I have come not to end the law but to fulfill it," he would proclaim, though he had a more generous reading of the law than most others. No, he was talking about the scribes who had special authority in matters dealing with the temple.

Daniel Harrington, a New Testament scholar, tells us this: "Beyond the basic skills of reading and writing, prospective scribes were expected to study 'the law of the Most High' and the wisdom of the ancients, to travel so as to broaden their experiences, to pray regularly and to ask God for wisdom, and in all these ways to achieve the immortality that comes from having a good 'name.'" (*The Gospel of Mark*, p.365)

The importance of having a "good name" – this was an "honor culture" in which status was everything. This is why they wore the long robes, to show off their superior standing, (maybe even long robes with red stripes on the sleeves!). This is why they frequented the marketplaces, seeking the adulation of the common folks. This is why they gravitated to the front row in the synagogue and the head table at the banquet. This is why they offered elegant and elongated prayers in public, to impress their power and authority on others.

So, what greater contrast would there be than between the scribes of great honor and the destitute widows of no standing, one who appears in the second part of the reading? Sitting where we do in the pews today, we instinctively take the side of the widow offering her last two coins and praise her for her faithfulness.

But that may not be the point Jesus wishes to make. Notice that he does not point out her selfless giving and then say to his disciples and the crowd gathered at his feet, "Go and do likewise." We do not know for sure

what he thought of the widow, but we definitely know what he thought of the scribes. They are the ones who use their power and authority to bankrupt the widows, who use their legal subtlety to steal their houses, to make them homeless, to relegate them to the street corners, and that is lamentable.

When we consider the two parts of this passage together, it becomes clear to us that Jesus is commenting on the injustice inherent in his society, and then, of all abominations, that the religious institutions play a part in it. The scribes steal the resources of the widows and then throw a couple of coins into the collection box, proud that they gave so much, when it is only chump change to them, and they stole it in the first place.

So, yes, we can praise the widow for her generosity, though Jesus does not, but we now hear his lamenting of the social system which causes such a disparity between those who sashay around in long robes and those who quietly, and almost invisibly, if Jesus were not watching so closely, duck into and out of the temple unnoticed.

Yes, we will pass the offering plate to everyone later in this worship service, and, yes, we are dependent upon what you place in it to keep our shared ministry going, but if you are the widow here this morning with only a few coins in your pocket, do not put them in! I will not suggest that you take money out when the plate goes by, but by all means, seek help from the church to make it through the day. We are not an “honor culture;” we are a “we are all in this together culture” and the only really good name around here is “Jesus Christ.”

One of my most cherished theologians and pastors, someone with whom I became acquainted before he died a few years ago, is William Sloane Coffin, Jr. I first met him decades ago when I was at Yale Divinity School and he was the chaplain at Battell Chapel on campus. And then through mutual friends, I had the chance to be in his company a few times over the years. He wrote this: “Had I but one wish for the churches of America I think it would be that they come to see the difference between charity and justice. Charity is a matter of personal attributes; justice, a matter of public policy. Charity seeks to alleviate the effects of injustice; justice seeks to eliminate the causes of it.” (Credo, p.62)

When our society steals the houses of widows, an image that stands for all kinds of injustice, the church must not be a part of the conspiracy but rather a prophet crying against it. Bill Coffin said in another moment, “In the best prophetic tradition, (Jesus) saw that the real troublemakers were not the ignorant and cruel, but the intelligent and corrupt,” the scribes of our own age. But being a prophet can be unpopular. Says Coffin, “Jesus knew that ‘Love your enemies’ didn’t mean, ‘Don’t make any!’” (Credo, p. 67)

A case in point when our coins and dollars and checks and online contributions become a prophetic cry for justice: Audrey is the name of the woman we read and heard about in the Madison news during the first weekend of October. A homeless mother of two children, she was the victim of an attempted sexual assault as she sought shelter overnight along State Street. The next night, shaken and upset, she came to our church and begged that we allow her two children and her to sleep outside our front door. Karen Andro, our outreach worker, agreed and told our security officer and the police that they were there with our permission until something better could be arranged. Then, Karen and the Rev. Tina Lang used emergency money made available to the staff by the Foundation Board to place the mother and two children in a motel for a week while Karen worked with Connor Wild at Bethel Lutheran, social workers at the Transition Education Program, a representative of The Road Home, an advocate of the Tenant Resource Center, and members of the Madison Police Department to come up with a permanent solution. A few weeks ago Audrey called Karen in tears to thank her for helping to get the family situated in a safe and secure apartment of their own and the children back in school.

We did not do it alone; each one of us can engage in acts of charity, but “it takes a village” to institute justice. That is why we pass the plate and send out pledge cards and seek donations of time and prayers and compassionate presence with those in greatest need, so that each one of us can play a role in making this a more just society. This is what a God-given one hundred-fold harvest really looks like to us.

Right now we are working with Dr. Ann Catlett to find a way to serve people who are homeless who need hospice care. We host some people in this circumstance on Wednesdays and Sundays and whenever our doors are open. Dr. Catlett is working with churches, other not-for-profits, and the university to establish a place where terminally ill people living on the streets can have a safe and hospitable place in which to die.

I have written another letter to the mayor of Madison which I intend to hand-deliver tomorrow. I wrote one a few months ago about homelessness in the city; I have yet to get a response, but I really do not need one. I do not intend to make enemies, but lamenting injustice is more than just sitting around, whining, “Gee, ain’t it

awful!” It requires engaging those with power and authority. In the letter I tell the mayor what I just told you about Audrey and the expansive network it has taken to make her life better, as well as the vision of Dr. Catlett. I end the letter with this: “Expelling people who are homeless from public places, as if they are cans to kick down the street, is not the answer. And, charity will not change much, though giving pocket money to the guy on the corner probably will do no harm. Public meals and temporary shelter programs provide a crucial intermediate service, but it is not enough. Justly directing our public resources to address the needs of real people will make a difference. We are striving to do our part and stand ready to help you do yours.”

I will let you know if I hear back, but even if it is a voice crying in the wilderness, it adds to our lament that things are not right in our world, in our town. Sending \$500 to an 800 number will not do it; building more elaborate temples will not do it; outfitting more self-aggrandizing people in long robes will not do it. But offering our greatest gifts faithfully to address every injustice on every street corner and in every doorway just might make a difference. What a harvest that might become!