



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

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“All She Had” **November 7, 2021**

Mark 12:38-44
Rev. Andy Call, Lead Pastor

Sacrifice is a dangerous concept.

We honor sacrifice in our society, in stories and monuments and holidays. We lift up those who make great sacrifice for their virtue and selflessness. But it's also apparent that sacrifice is something we think is best when someone else is doing it.

The word sacrifice is the product of two Latin roots: *sacer*, which means “sacred” or “holy;” and *facere*, which means “to make.” A sacrifice, then, is something that is offered as an act of devotion or worship. The sense in which it means “to surrender” or “to give up something for something else” is a later definition that first appeared in the 18th century. Theologian Emily Townes points out that the way we use the word sacrifice today means something very different than an act of devotion or an expression of worship. Sacrifice to us usually means giving up more than we should and less than we can.¹

Our Gospel Lesson for today features what appears at first to be a noble sacrifice for the faith. Jesus observed people placing money in the temple collection box. While many wealthy people put in large sums, the person who caught his eye was a woman who dropped in two small copper coins of very little value. He drew the disciples' attention to her, noting that she was poor and a widow. He told them that she had given more than anyone else, because those two seemingly insignificant coins were all she had, even what she needed to live on.

This passage from Mark is the assigned Gospel Lesson for today, appearing, like every other lectionary passage, once every three years. For the first time in my years of ministry, it doesn't coincide with our annual giving campaign, thanks to a shift in our stewardship and generosity calendar. That's a good thing, because this makes for a lousy text about giving. Criticize the large givers and praise the small? That won't balance many budgets.

But when we look at this story in context, I'm not so sure that Jesus's point was to commend the woman's gift. In the preceding verses, he levied withering criticism of the religious leaders “who walk around in long robes” and like to be honored and respected. The harshest charge? “They cheat widows out of their homes.” Right on cue, along comes a widow and puts the last of her coins in the temple treasury. And in the following verses, which Rev. Moseng will preach on next week, Jesus foretells the destruction of that very temple. Inspired by teachings of religious leaders, a poor widow gives her last two coins to support a temple that isn't even going to be around in a generation. She gave all she had to an institution that was both corrupt and condemned. Not exactly the feel-good story that inspires new pledges.

Since I've raised the issue, I feel compelled to point out that almost none of the offerings to Church of the Saviour are used to preserve this building. Thanks to the Church of the Saviour Foundation, regular building maintenance and structural improvement costs are covered outside the church's operating budget. Some of your giving goes to providing income and livelihood to our gifted and dedicated staff, though I can assure you none of us are getting rich doing this work. We maximize every dollar we can for mission and ministry, which enables us to have a transformative impact on our community and around the world. And our budget and spending reports are available to you to see any time you want to see them.

But what about how each of us invests the rest of our time, talent, and treasure? Are the institutions and causes in which we invest worthy of our gifts? What about people? Anyone who risks relationship will encounter at some point those who are chronic “takers” with little giving in return. Sometimes, we may feel like the widow, giving all we have to a job, an organization, or people who are bound let us down in the end.

Increasingly, I've come to think this story isn't about our identifying with the widow or to urge us to be more like her. Nor is it a critique of wealthy but stingy givers. It isn't even about the religious leaders, though their selfish and corrupt actions serve as examples for us to avoid. No, this story is about Jesus. The one who pointed out the sacrificial giving of the poor widow is the One who was himself on the way to giving all he had for the corrupt and condemned – namely, us. We, the undeserving, the ungrateful, are the beneficiaries of a gift not so valueless as money, but of life and eternity itself.

¹ Emilie Townes. Commentary in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Year B, Volume 4. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press (2009), 288.

Did we deserve it? No. But are we worthy of his gift? Jesus thought so. He said in John's gospel, "I give up my life so that I can take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I give it up because I want to." (John 10:17-18) And later, just before he was arrested, he prayed, "Father, I want those you gave me to be with me where I am. Then they can see my glory, which you gave me because you loved me before the creation of the world." (John 17:24) As Jesus moved among the crowds in Jerusalem, he knew that not only would they not understand his death, but that many would be complicit in it. Even his closest friends would fail. But he did it, anyway.

We're not asked to make the sacrifice Jesus made. We already have a Savior, and we're not it. And we cannot make ourselves somehow more deserving of what he gave for us. There is nothing we can do to make him love us more, and nothing we can do to make him love us less. His love for us is perfect – unmerited and unlimited. How we live our lives in *response* to that gift is not a demonstration of our worthiness, but of our gratitude.

Today, we honor our saints – not because they were perfect or even exceptional. This is not an induction into the Church of the Saviour Hall of Fame. The purpose of this day is neither to venerate those we remember nor to assess the balance of their merits and faults. Today is, above all else, about gratitude.

We honor today all those who have gone before us – those the church recognizes as saints and martyrs, and those saints of the ordinary variety, who graced our pews and our lives. Today, like those depicted in the windows above us, they look down upon us, resting from their labors in God's loving embrace. They were parents, spouses, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and friends. They contributed to the life of their church, their communities, and their families; to causes and organizations and institutions important to them. As we speak their names today – those who were part of our congregation that we name aloud and those we remember personally and name in our hearts – we honor that part of them they poured into us. They gave us both love and challenge. They inspired us and they disappointed us. For better or worse, their lives helped make us who we are. Are we worthy of their investment?

Last week, Jenn and I attended the funeral of Emory Crowder. He had recently celebrated his 98th birthday, and though he'd outlived nearly all his peers, he was surrounded by friends. Emory was one of the first people I met when I started serving on the staff at Westlake United Methodist Church. He and his late wife Kathryn tended the plants and flower beds on the church grounds, a task they devoted themselves to just about every day during the growing season and quite a few during dormant times, too. Emory had served in World War II, a member of what we appropriately refer to as the Greatest Generation. I knew from the shadow box in his basement den that he was a decorated Marine Corps veteran who served in the Tinian, Okinawa, and Saipan, though he didn't share many details. Over the last few years, as the remaining members of that generation grew fewer, that part of his life garnered more attention. I learned that he was wounded in action, but eagerly returned to his unit after treatment, arriving just as they became pinned down in a 5 ½ hour firefight. He was a corpsman, and that day he saved the lives of 15 marines by carrying them to safety.

Emory and Kathryn never had children of their own, but they were like family to a whole host of people, including us. They were strong, positive influences on us in the early days of our marriage and celebrated the birth of all three of our kids. Emory always made time for me, leaning on a shovel as we caught up on church and family life, stopping mid-chore at his house to invite me in for a piece of watermelon or glass of iced tea, or coming to the phone when I needed his advice. He gave selflessly to the church, willing to do anything other than being on a committee. He was perhaps the greatest man I have ever known – not just because he was a hero, but because he generously shared himself with the people in his life. Emory knew better than any of us what true sacrifice is. What he did for others wasn't a sacrifice to him. He was a living example of gratitude, always giving of himself as an offering to God and an investment in all of us who were graced to know him. I carry his memory with me today and always will.

Those we remember today gave us more than we can ever repay or even count. We can and should pay it forward, giving in turn to others just as we have received. Will they deserve it or even appreciate it? Have we? The offerings we make of ourselves are ultimately gifts to God, expressions of gratitude for the life we all can know in Christ. With intention, *every* moment can be an expression of worship.

Sacrifice is a dangerous concept. Applied too liberally, we begin to see every investment as a sacrifice – the choices we make, the love we share, the lives shared with us. We're not asked to sacrifice ourselves out of loyalty or guilt. But we are invited to make our lives an offering, to generously share ourselves in gratitude to the God from whom all blessings flow. One day, God willing, people will speak our names at a service like this one. May we live our lives so that every moment is a gift – received and given – in the faith and love that shape us. Amen.