

Over the past few months, we've spent a good amount of time in worship and from this pulpit preparing for the election that happened last Tuesday. One of the things I've said from the pulpit and in various classrooms is that what matters more than what we agree or disagree about, politically, is our identity as God's people.

I believe that.

And...I know that within this...our community...after the election there are many who are upset by the outcome, or disappointed, or fearful, or numb. I know that there are others who are encouraged, or energized, or feeling validated. There are also plenty who are apathetic and are just glad the circus is over.

I think it is important to recognize that we are all – in this room right now – carrying some or all of those feelings with us. And that can be hard...because it's one thing to **think** in different ways...but it's another to **feel** in different ways...because those feelings and emotions are real...and, in many cases, they are raw.

When we made a plan for worship months ago, we of course had no idea what the outcome of Tuesday's election would be or what the country would feel like. So rather than attempt to pick a Scripture to meet the moment, we decided to use the Revised Common Lectionary...a tool that assigns Scripture to each Sunday of the church year on a three-year cycle. The lectionary has been around for a long time...multiple decades. On this Sunday, the lectionary assigned a part of Mark's gospel.

Before I read it, I ask that you join me in prayer. Let us pray: *We are weary, Lord. From the constant stress and noise of electioneering. From the chatter and anticipation. From the red and blue signs and maps and graphs. From the very real and important decisions that have an impact on our future. This sanctuary is no retreat from our world...but we do ask that in these moments, you might help us focus so that we can immerse ourselves in your word...so that by your Spirit, that word might shine a light on the path we walk...today and every tomorrow. We ask it in Jesus's name. Amen.*

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Our Scripture is from the 12th chapter of Mark's gospel. I am beginning to read in the 38th verse. This passage happens outside the Temple in Jerusalem. Listen with me for a word from God...

As he taught, he said, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, 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.'

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 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.’

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One way to think about the Scripture we just heard is to see it as a lesson in how to pay attention.

Over the past year...and the last few months, in particular...we’ve all been the targets of people who were trying to get us to pay attention.

I don’t know about you, but I got a few text messages and phone calls over the past couple of weeks. In fact, just last Sunday, I got six. Three while I was teaching Sunday School, and three while I was preaching.

According to US News and World Report, more than \$16 billion was spent during this year’s presidential election¹. Most of that money was used in the effort to get people who live in swing states like ours to pay attention to the party’s candidate of choice. That’s the science of electioneering: leveraging, influencing, sometimes even manipulating patterns of human behavior in order that people will pay enough attention to vote in a particular way.

In the passage we heard from Mark’s gospel, when Jesus sat opposite the temple treasury – watching people present their offerings – he was aware of the long-established patterns that determined what would catch people’s attention².

And it was obvious that those who held power within the religious establishment of Jesus’ time had lost perspective.

The scribes – those whose job was to interpret biblical law – were supposed to be servants of the people. They were forbidden from taking a salary, in order that they might live simply and off the subsidy of the temple offerings.

Instead, they found ways to game the system for their benefit. They brandished their long robes in public to gain attention. They relished their seats of honor in the synagogue and at banquets. The way the Scribes afforded all of this was – in Jesus’ words – through “devour[ing] the widows,” by lining their pockets with the temple offerings to suit their pleasures.

¹ <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2024-11-01/16-billion-will-be-spent-in-the-2024-election-wheres-it-all-going>
² I am grateful for the good work of my sister, The Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin and her paper on this text (The Well, Montreat, 2012)

Outside the Temple in Jerusalem there were thirteen offering boxes that were shaped like trumpets (wide at the top, and narrow at the bottom, so that it was much easier to put money in than it was to take it out). When people threw their money in these trumpet-shaped collection plates it would make quite racket. The more money one threw in, the more racket. The more racket, the more attention.

Jesus was watching all of this.

Then he watched as an older woman – a widow – make her way to the collection box. Jesus watched as this woman presented her offering – a meager offering of two small coins...coins that were flimsy. Coins that did not make much of a racket. Coins that did not draw much – if any – attention.

It was then that Jesus called his disciples together and he said: “look at that. This is what I want you to notice. Not the show. Not the dramatic presentation. Rather, notice the quiet acts of generosity. The selfless acts of sacrifice.”

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It takes a lot to change what we notice.

Jesus’ disciples have always had trouble un-learning in this regard.
We are conditioned to notice things that we associate with success:
Money, Power, The physically attractive

Yet, every day, we are surrounded by people who give of themselves in ways that fail to attract our attention.

Tomorrow is Veteran’s Day. On Veteran’s Day, I usually spend some time thinking about my former colleague, Bryan.

I’ve told you about Bryan before. Bryan was an associate pastor for pastoral care. He sat by bedsides, around kitchen tables, at hospital waiting rooms, and in his office to be with people in the middle of life. Leading sessions for people to work out their faith and their emotions in the wake of losing a loved one.

Before seminary and his call to pastoral ministry in the church, Bryan was a helicopter pilot in Vietnam. He would fly missions to pick up wounded soldiers behind enemy lines. For his service, Bryan received many honors, including the Silver Star.

Throughout his career as a pastor, Bryan carried with him the experience of being an Air Force pilot. He also carried with him the wounds of war. Not the obvious wounds – but the psychological ones. I doubt most of

the people who benefitted from Bryan’s pastoral presence and care knew that he actively managed his PTSD. Or that he had recurring nightmares. Or that when the door would slam, he would startle. Few people appreciated the energy it took Bryan to be so present with those he pastored.

You don’t have to look farther than the pews in front or behind you to find other examples of people who give of themselves in ways that evade our attention: the mom of an adult child with special needs who summons all the energy and courage she has just to make it to church or a circle meeting, the spouse whose partner has dementia – who works the caregiving schedule out so he can serve communion, the teacher whose salary barely covers the cost of living for her own child...much less her parents whom she supports...who shows up to help the children in our preschool grow and thrive.

And that’s just within these walls.

Think about who and what we fail to notice beyond them.

Where we work. Where we go to school. Where we eat. Who cleans our homes. Who delivers our mail. Whose lives intersect with our own.

The election we’ve just lived through spent an extraordinary amount of time, money, and energy trying to capture our attention.

Now that the election is over, perhaps it is time for us to think intentionally about where we train our attention next. Who will catch our eye? Whose story will move us to have empathy? What vulnerable population will we choose to validate? Where are there people who give of themselves in ways that otherwise go ignored?

What gets in the way of us paying this kind of attention? Why don’t others pay attention to these people? What can we do to make vulnerable people more visible? What choices can we make that might amplify the quiet sacrifices that so many others make?

Regardless of what you are feeling after Tuesday’s election – whether you are despairing or heartened or just glad it’s over...I want to validate that feeling...acknowledge that it’s real...and also challenge us.

Because now the hard press from those who wanted our votes is largely over. The spigot of money designed to influence our choices has, at least, slowed.

The texts and the calls and the ads and the signs in the yards are gradually going away.

And we have a choice about who and what we will pay attention to next.

We shouldn’t be naïve.

It is true that those who don’t make the most noise often get lost.

It is true that the most vulnerable among us tend to have the least agency.

It is true that – every day, we are surrounded by people who give of themselves in quiet, thankless, taken-for-granted ways that seldom get noticed.

But God does.

God always notices sacrifices like that; people like that.

And God calls us all to pay attention.

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Preachers often read this morning’s story about the widow’s offering as a way to cajole their members into give the church more money.

“If she can do it – then you can do it!” we preachers might say.

But the magnitude of this woman’s offering goes far beyond helping the temple meet its bottom line.

Her act of generosity is more than a stewardship object lesson.

It is the kind of action that Jesus wants his disciples to notice.

It is the kind of action that Jesus wants his disciples to emulate.

It is the kind of action that Jesus, himself, will take.

Four days from this episode, Jesus would give the world everything he had as he stretched out his life on a cross.

And in that last, most amazing act of grace, for those of us who are called to be disciples, our vision becomes clear.

Our eyes are retrained.

And we see...

That what matters are not the things we are conditioned to notice...

Or do in order that we are noticed...

But what matters are the ways that we respond to God’s grace by giving ourselves away to one another in simple and profound acts of love – which starts with where we choose to invest our attention.

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.