

Twenty-fourth Sunday After Pentecost
November 8, 2015
Marley United Methodist Church

Hebrews 9: 24-28
Mark 12: 38-44

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

There is a poker term “all in” – it means that you have put everything you have into the pot – you’re holding nothing back. If there was a title or a summary statement for this sermon it would be “In Jesus, God went all in”.

In our relatively comfortable lives, it is hard to wrap our heads around some of the basic truths about God and the good news of the gospel. Usually when we examine our lives in terms of the Gospel we experience a sense of disorientation – things turn upside down and seem backwards. Indeed the good news of the gospel is a radical revolution in the way we view the value systems and structures of our world.

There is in God an impossible turning in which the very worst that may visit us in life is able to reconfigure itself as to become the very best. It is a revolution that resists explanation. It happens in our experience. We know that it happens, and we can recognize it when it happens to others. But we struggle to understand or tell it, to give a name to it even for ourselves.

To my mind, the best example of telling this is the gospel of the crucified and risen Jesus is. “Best” because here the story unfolds from our lips, from the lips of the church, and yet it does not come from us. We hear it, first of all, from God. What we confess with our lips and know in our hearts begins not with our own hearts, but with an event that happens in the heart of God. “Best” because the apparent failure and defeat which the public execution of Jesus suggests, is turned on its head in the victory of the Resurrection. What had seemed a dismal ending reconfigures itself to become a wonderful new beginning.

The gospel story of the widow who gave all she had, all she had to live on, is another example. As we have it here, in Mark, it is a story about discipleship, an allegory and example for us of what a disciple of Jesus should do. But I’m not so sure that is what Jesus or Mark intended. Let’s consider for a moment the possibility that this message is not all about us – let’s consider the woman as a symbol for God.

On the lips of Jesus, the woman's willingness to part with everything that she has to live on has primarily a *theological* meaning: it is *God* who goes all in and loses everything in his encounter with human beings. Even here in Mark's version, the traces of that shocking truth are visible. If we make of this a story of how we should give all we have, we are faced with the truth that God blesses us back so richly that it is tempting to become selfish and suggest that the best way to get rich is to give. While that is true—it is a stewardship message and that is not what Mark is work at here. I mean, seriously folks, what does God get out of a relationship with us? Nothing. Why then does he so earnestly desire a relationship with us? Because he loves us. How much?? Enough to go all in and give up his Son to death to make it possible. Just like the widow who gave up all she had to live on.

Consider if you will, what has happened in Mark's gospel story so far. In chapter 1 we read that Jesus had come to establish a kingdom, the kingdom of God. In chapters 2 through 7 we read stories about the signs of that kingdom's arrival: the preaching of good news, healings, exorcisms, and (not least) the shattering of human traditions about what is right and what is wrong, turning things upside down. In chapters 8 & 10, Jesus tells his disciples that salvation comes only for the one who is willing to die, to be baptized into death, to go all in. Also in chapter 10, in what I believe to be the key utterance of Mark's gospel, Jesus declares that salvation, while impossible for human beings to accomplish, is indeed possible for God.

Jesus came to do what we could not do for ourselves. Can you see where Mark is leading us with that story-line? The story of the gospel leads inexorably to suffering and to crucifixion, as a direct and necessary consequence of God's encounter with human beings—the story couldn't end any other way. When God chose to interact with his fallen creation he knew what it would cost him and he went all in.

And Mark's telling of the gospel also leads us to a revolutionary way of thinking about our world--that strange turning in which death becomes life, poverty becomes riches, and the loss of self becomes the key to a newly made identity that God gives freely.

So what Mark is trying to tell us in this stark story about a widow who gives away even the little she has, is nothing other than what he is telling us in the gospel as a whole. No one can ever be saved from life's cruelties unless that person is willing to confess and acknowledge their own *involvement* in the system that perpetuates those cruelties. We can't point a finger at our society and say it is someone else's fault—we are involved and by our involvement we keep the system going.

What I mean is this. For Mark – and indeed for Paul who wrote before him – there are two powers in the world: the power of religion and the power of the gospel of grace. Religion and gospel are not the same – a Christian religion is an oxymoron. In Mark's world, as in ours, it was the power of religion that appeared to reign supreme – religion provided sacrifices or rituals to influence the future and protect us from the present.

Religion leads us to the belief that if we are 'religious' about paying our dues, working hard, and keeping happy the powers that be, then we're going to be OK. It is the belief that if we do the right things in the right way at the right time, god (with a small g) will do right by us. We want to get ahead, so we become invested in the very system that enslaves us because we believe it will reward us.

And this is exactly where most of us are: compelled, entranced, invested, and enslaved. Yet, the religious system that claims to be able to influence our fate can only ever lead us into despair, because it condemns us to reap only what we sow – our experiences are limited to what we deserve. It is like capitalism, which delivers to us only what we produce ourselves – images of the real, but not the real itself. The real eludes us, for we are not God. We cannot create even ourselves, let alone what we need for happiness or peace! And no amount of religious posturing or elbow grease will change that – nothing we can do will ever change that.

And the widow in this story is an example of exactly that. Widows in Israel at this time were caught in a double-bind, a circle of despair with no exit. Like all good Jews, she longed to be part of the people of the redeemed, those who were acceptable to God because they obeyed the priestly law. But she also wanted to survive. When her male protector died, she had to turn to activities condemned by the law in order to feed herself and her children (if there were any). She had no choice but to turn to prostitution or stealing or become a servant in the houses of idolaters where she would have had to work on the Sabbath and could not keep kosher.

The only way she could stay alive and ritually pure at the same time, was to accept a form of moral blackmail. She did what she had to do earn enough to stay alive and then had to pay the religious institutions a large portion of her earnings in return for their acceptance and 'forgiveness', even as her 'betters' continued to look down on her.

This kept her in a state of perpetual want and need. It also fed the very system that oppressed her. So nothing was able to change. She reaped what she sowed, her poverty and need created nothing but more poverty and more need. And, my friends, if that isn't a comment on our own society I don't know what is.

Thank God there is another power in this world, the power of the gospel of grace. Grace, as I have been telling you for some time now, is the opposite of religion. And that surely raises some interesting dilemmas for we religious professionals. We are charged with the perpetuation of a religious institution while proclaiming a salvation that leads us to giving ourselves over to a different logic, the logic of God which is called by the beautiful name of grace.

Psalm 127 was appointed to accompany these texts this morning – I've deliberately chosen to wait until now to read it to you – the first two verses carry the theme.

Ps 127.1f

"If the Lord does not build a house, then those who build it work in vain. If the Lord does not guard a city, then the watchman stands guard in vain. It is vain for you to rise early, come home late and work so hard for your food. Yes, he can provide for those whom he loves even when they sleep." Hmmmm, I wonder how the folks in the HR department feel about that.

I must confess I am a war movie buff and one of the lesser known classics of the VietNam conflict is Hamburger Hill based on the true story of a unit of the 101st Airborne who, over a period of 10 days, attacked a well fortified and entrenched NVA hilltop position in the A Shau Valley near the border with Laos. The pointlessness of the peculiarities of military life in the field and the carnage during the assault creates terrible stress and angst amongst the troops, who deal with it by developing a series of hand slaps and knuckle bumps to a tune "It don't mean nothin' – it just don't mean nothin'.

And indeed it doesn't---*"If the Lord does not build a house, then those who build it work in vain. If the Lord does not guard a city, then the watchman stands guard in vain. It is vain for you to rise early, come home late and work so hard for your food. Yes, he can provide for those whom he loves even when they sleep."* It is a treadmill of futility unless we understand that without God it all means nothing – and with God it still means nothing, but it doesn't matter, because we live with a different mindset, a God's eye view that is illuminated by the gospel of grace.

Grace is the gift of God given to us to question, to interrupt, to displace and even destroy the cycle of despair which is religion. With the gift of grace, we reap what we have not sown, and live in the power of that which we have not produced or made for ourselves. In grace we experience the love of God shown in Christ's self-sacrifice. In Christ, God is totally for us, he's all in, even to the point of identifying with us in our pointless cycle of despair. Read the gospel, how often he laments that people just don't get it – he mourns over Jerusalem, and in Gethsemane and on Calvary he suffered the full consequence of what that cycle produces: nothingness, and only nothingness – a painful death and a borrowed grave.

Of course, having given itself over to nothingness and to death, grace is not exhausted. It rises from the ashes of its own destruction, and proceeds to infect the religious system like a virus which cannot be quashed. In the gospel story, this power is called Resurrection. Religion, any religion, is a system of rules, shoulds and should nots with punishments and 'prices to be paid' for forgiveness and restoration to good standing. God's gospel of grace blows all of that out of the water. God's gospel of grace is the perseverance of love in the face of death and despair, the never-depleted surplus of possibility over necessity. After all of the necessities have been taken care of (by

God – we can't even do that for ourselves, at least not very well) – God's possibilities are still overwhelmingly abundant.

In Mark's world, the widows of Israel were forever caught in a web of religious despair. In trying to escape it, they succeeded only in fulfilling its demands.

This story of the widow who went all in is a message of the gospel of grace. When seen in the context of the gospel as a whole, we must understand this act evangelically, that is, as a picture or metaphor of salvation – it is what Christ did for us and for all who follow his way of the cross.

My friends, it is only when we give up trying to use religion to influence our fate, only when we leave all we have at the foot of the cross and go all in for Jesus, accepting whatever life sends our way, trusting God – only then shall we find ourselves free of the enslavement of religion. Because then we who are belong to Christ live our lives daily in the system we inhabit, that system does not possess us. The system can thunder condemnation or dangle shiny attractive 'rewards', and our peace is not disturbed because we know it don't mean nothin', it just don't mean nothin'.

For we are Christ's, and our truest selves are hidden with Christ in God, as the apostle says. Therefore we are freed from the desire to get ahead, free from the need to jump through the hoops of religion. We are people who know a love which is stronger even than death, and we know the gift of a life and future we have not produced. Therefore we choose, over and over again, in all the minutiae of life, to serve our neighbor without thought of the cost, to lay down our lives for our spouse, our children and our friends. We can do so because the price has already been paid. Fate can not take from us anything more than Christ has already given. We are free to give ourselves in his name without thought for self-preservation or of the future. Say what!? We are free to give ourselves in his name without thought for self-preservation or of the future. Do we not know the teachings of our Lord? Matthew 6.34a "So then, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself." Perhaps more to the point is Colossians 3.3: "for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God." The price has been paid and life can not take more from you than Jesus has already given.

And what he gave now returns to inhabit all the world even more powerful, bringing light and life and peace where once there was only darkness, death and enmity. So it can be for us. Jesus promises that if we will face our deepest fear – the loss of our very souls – and if we will trust in his love, then we shall live, even though we die. " (John 11.25)

Let us give thanks that it is so.

Amen