

Imagine Another Way

Psalm 127:1-2 Unless Abba God builds the house, their labor is in vain who build it. Unless Abba God watches over the city, in vain the watcher keeps their vigil.

Introduction

We're marching forward here in the gospel of Mark and learning, in every which way, what it looks like to be a disciple of Christ. And while I've stressed (because Mark has stressed) that it's hard and can be (very) uncomfortable, the actual point is that following Christ, being a disciple of Jesus, is really and simply about being human...fully, and totally, materially and spiritually, from the inniest parts of our souls to the outiest surfaces of our body. For Mark's Jesus, being fully and totally human requires a few things, full dependence on God through faith in Christ by the power of the indwelling divine Spirit. It's this triune foundation that nourishes us in the amniotic fluid of divine love, bears us into the world swaddled in divine love, and continues to grow us toward divine love that is faith making itself known in the world through acts of love for God's beloved. As the psalm tells us this morning: "Unless Abba God builds the house, their labor is in vain who build it. Unless Abba God watches over the city, in vain the watcher keeps their vigil."

In other words, when left to our own devices and to our own cleverness we create kingdoms and orders that remove us from not only God but from our own humanity. It is not some evil force that makes even well-intentioned systems and structures inhuman, it's our own doing. We create hierarchies, in groups and out groups, us and them; we determine who is worth saving and who isn't; we fabricate narratives elevating some above others because of wealth, skin, gender and sex, religion, age, abledness... We do this. And Jesus came, according to Mark, to expose these tendencies of the inhabitants of the kingdom of humanity and to usher them into the reign of God as citizens who make a difference in the world just by being willing to be utterly and completely human by loving (in word and deed) those whom God loves. By faith in Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, disciples of Christ become those human beings—fully dependent on God—who see through elaborate presentations of power and prestige and dare to imagine another way, a better way, a more human way defined by the reign of God and to the wellbeing of the neighbor.

Mark 12:38-44

And then [Jesus] was saying in his teaching, "You perceive from the scribes, those who desire to walk around in the apparel of the elite and [be] greeted deferentially in the places of assembly and [desire] the most honorable seat in the synagogue and the chief place at the table at dinner, the ones who take material advantage of the households of

widows and for pretexts pray for a long time; ***they, they*** will receive a greater judgment..." (Mk. 12:38-40)

Apart from what we experienced last week between Jesus and the scribe who "got it," we are back with Jesus's continual denunciation of self-aggrandized power run amok.¹ Literally. Jesus has zero tolerance for these scribes² and exposes their "general character" manifesting as "ostentatious, exploitative, and hypocritical".³ Jesus proposes to his disciples, in this passage, another way of *being* (and leading) in the world, a way he, Jesus, the Son of God and of Humanity, will take which is the way he expects his disciples⁴ to take, too.⁵

If you thought that the politics of Jesus emphasized being nice and tolerant, this passage blows that notion to smithereens; Jesus is thoroughly polemical⁶ right now, and that's why he broad brushed an entire group of Jewish authority⁷ when he says: *You perceive from the scribes those who desire....* The "you perceive" is a command, meaning *YOU look....LOOK!* And the "those who desire" modifies the scribes as those who have the ambition to abuse their power and to exploit the people. In other words, Jesus is saying, *Look, LOOK!, look at how the scribes not only exploit the people but that they desire to do it...* They desire⁸ the glory their fancy/celebratory robes⁹ bring them, the deferential greetings¹⁰ their rank demands from those who are inferior, the best

¹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC, eds. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 489. "Apart from vv. 28-34, it is true, all the scribes we have met in this gospel have been critics, if not openly enemies, of Jesus, and here in Jerusalem their hostility has come to a head as Jesus had predicted...But there is no comparable denunciation of the priests or elders."

² France, *Mark*, 491. "In that case the subjects of these participles are not a new group, or even a subgroup of the scribes, but must still be the scribes in general."

³ France, *Mark*, 489.

⁴ France, *Mark*, 490. "These remarks, too, are addressed specifically to the disciples....and do not form part of the public denunciation of the scribes. Jesus again calls those who follow him to abandon the world's conventions of importance: the first are to be last and the last first."

⁵ France, *Mark*, 489. "But the warning here is not related to what they. May have in mind to do to Jesus, but to their general character as ostentatious, exploitative, and hypocritical...In this context the effect is to offer the crowd a choice as to the sort of leader they will follow, and Jesus pulls no punches in exposing the shortcomings of scribes in general."

⁶ France, *Mark*, 490. "What is now recorded, however, is not so much teaching as polemic."

⁷ France, *Mark*, 489. "...this is polemics in the context of a highly charged and potentially fatal confrontation, and a suitably broad brush is applied."

⁸ William C. Placher, *Mark, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, eds Amy Plantinga Pauw and William C. Placher. (Louisville: WJK, 2010), 181. "Beware of those who hold the chief seats, Augustine writes, 'Not because they hold them, but because they love them.' Those who are condemned put on a good appearance of piety praying long prayers, but what they seek is honor and wealth."

⁹ France, *Mark*, 490. "a στολή is not an everyday garment, but a festive or celebratory robe...and suggests 'dressing up'."

¹⁰ France, *Mark*, 490. "Deferential ἀσπασμοί are a mark of social standing..."

seats, and to siphon the livelihood from widows through being paid for their long prayers.¹¹ And when it comes to leaders who opt for arrogant self-involvement at the expense of God's people—especially the weak and least of these in society like widows¹²—God takes massive issue and divine judgment comes...not for the people so deceived and duped, but for those in authority who capitalized on and benefited from such deception. This is quite literally what the major and minor prophets are all about, and this is why Jesus then says, ***they, they** will receive a greater (divine¹³) judgment!*

Then, according to the text, Mark tells us, *And then after sitting down opposite the treasury he was looking at how the crowd is throwing money into the treasury. And many wealthy people were throwing in much. And then a poor widow came and threw in two of the smallest amounts of money¹⁴ (which is a quadrans).* This scene is jarring, it doesn't seem to fit with what has just come before. Or is it? Seems there's some ostentatious public¹⁵ demonstrations of the rich throwing large sums of money¹⁶ into the various thirteen "trumpet chests"¹⁷. It's here where there's an overlap: Jesus, again, has zero tolerance for ostentation and zero tolerance for exploitation. Thus, it's not so much an attack on the rich per se but on the desire to show off how much one can and is giving thus drawing attention to oneself (like the Scribes in the marketplaces in their robes).¹⁸ In this way, it can also be (potentially) an attack on institutions

¹¹ France, *Mark*, 492. "...προφάσει would naturally describe the fraudulent means by which it is achieved. In that case the reference could be to the sort of payment for the prayers of a religious professional which became common in mediaeval Christianity."

¹² France, *Mark*, 491. "The vulnerability of widows is a recurrent theme in biblical literature, so that to defraud them is particularly despicable."

¹³ France, *Mark*, 492. Κρίμα a reference to "...God's eschatological judgment, of which Jesus has spoken so vividly..."

¹⁴ France, *Mark*, 493. "The λεπτόν was the smallest denomination of currency in use, a copper coin less than a centimetre in diameter and worth less than one hundredth of a denarius (which was itself half the value of the half-shekel temple tax)."

¹⁵ France, *Mark*, 489. "The scene is in the Court of the Women, so-called not because it was a specifically for women but because it was the nearest point to the temple building proper which was open to women. Here stood a range of thirteen 'trumpet chests'...designed to receive monetary offerings, including not only the half-shekel temple tax but also 'freewill offerings'. The half-shekel was obligatory for men, but any contribution to the other chests was voluntary, and would be noticed by anyone who, like Jesus and his disciples, was watching...perhaps it was a recognised tourist attraction."

¹⁶ France, *Mark*, 492. "χαλκός is strictly 'copper' or 'bronze', and the widow's two coins would be of copper." And, "But the large sums donated by the rich would presumably be in silver or gold coins... so that χαλκός is here used in its more general sense of 'money'."

¹⁷ France, *Mark*, 492. "γαζοφυλάκον...its reference here to the collecting chests in the Court of the Women is demanded by the context..."

¹⁸ France, *Mark*, 489-490. "Jesus' comment on the widow's offering is not an attack on wealth or the wealthy as such, but rather on the scale of values which takes more account of the amount of a gift than of the dedication of the giver. It develops further the new perspective of the kingdom of God which Jesus has been so assiduously teaching his disciples on the way to Jerusalem specially his comments responding to their astonishment at his treatment of the rich man in 10:23-27."

that allow the exploitation and extortion of widows their business for their own benefit—donations for the poor were done elsewhere apart from these trumpet chests.¹⁹

Jesus, in response to witnessing the widow's offering, according to Mark, says, *Truly I say to you—so take notice—that the poor widow threw much more into the treasury than all others; for all others threw in out of that which abounds, but she threw in out of her poverty all she was having, her entire livelihood.* We've often made this offering a type of virtue even to the extent that some churches have suggested that you must give all you have to prove your faithfulness. It is possible that Jesus is glorifying her self-sacrifice and even honoring her heartfelt gift. It could be, too, that Jesus is placing a certain amount of emphasis on the reality that this widow just gave to the **temple** the means of her next meal when it may have been better for her to eat and live another day.²⁰ It is possible that Jesus is calling out the narrative justifying stealing from such people their very livelihood.²¹ Thus, like the scribes, the human religious authority, consumed by the ideologies of the kingdom of humanity, have turned the temple into a money making institution, granting more and more power and privilege to the themselves (thus the cycle repeats from the beginning).

Conclusion

What do we take away from this? It is not to give all you have, though, during pledge month...give what you can! But more importantly, the point of this passage for us, today, is that humility carries way more currency in the economy of the reign of God than self-aggrandizement. This isn't about not tooting your horn once in a while because you did something great or something great happened—you need not resort to just saying, "It's all Jesus!", Jesus wants you to receive the credit, too! This is about how we participate in systems and institutions that are prone to extorting and taking advantage of the least of these (and some of these least of these includes you). It's about our faith in Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, that we, as disciples of Christ, become human beings—fully dependent on God—who see through elaborate presentations of power and prestige and dare to imagine another way, a better way, a more human way defined by the reign of God and to the wellbeing of the neighbor. We are to be truly and fully human in a world demanding to grow ever more inhuman.

¹⁹ France, *Mark*, 493. "All contributions were therefore for the work of the temple; charitable donations for the poor were made separately."

²⁰ France, *Mark*, 493. "While Jesus was not averse to exaggeration to make a point, it is quite possible that in first-century Palestine the donation of two [copper coins] would have left a poor widow without the means for her next meal."

²¹ Placher, *Mark*, 182. Alt reading: the widow mistakenly gives into a system that is bleeding her dry "Jesus lamented the widow's contribution"