

25th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
November 11, 2018

Text: Mark 12:38-44

Theme: Sacrifices

In a recent article that I read it said: Honoring veterans does not just mean taking care of them. It means giving them the tools they need to take care of themselves. It means understanding the sacrifices they made and offering them help to overcome the demons they faced. It means giving them the respect that they are due.

My father served in the United States Navy during World War II and was stationed in Japan. He was on the USS Missouri when the agreement was signed that ended the war. As children my brother and I used to ask him questions all the time about his time overseas but he never wanted to talk about it. During his years of service he put together an album that we were permitted to look at ... but only the handwritten notes under each photo gave us clues as to what it was like for him during those two-and-a-half years. Graphic pictures explained vividly some of the challenges he faced on the battlefield. I found that album and it is displayed in the Crossroads this morning.

Let us fast forward to the time of my first call. There were several men who were members of the church but they never attended our worship services. Jack was among them. He came to our social events and enjoyed being there but when Sunday mornings rolled around he told his wife he could not go to church with her. He never gave her a reason but just gently refused her invitations.

So I still remember the day Gayle invited me to their home for dinner because I saw it as an opportunity to have a one-on-one conversation with Jack. When I arrived at their home Jack was very happy to see me and (over the course of the night) I learned a lot about their life together. And then (when we were at the end of our meal) all of a sudden he felt the need to explain his absence on Sunday mornings. He told me he did not feel worthy or forgiven for some of the things he did when he served in the Army during our times of war. It was a bold confession to make and one that his wife heard for the first time.

But once that was revealed then that very night the healing started between Jack and his wife / and between Jack and God. He never made it back into the church for worship but several times a year I visited him at home and we read Scripture and we prayed and he received Holy Communion. He came to understand (in a good and healthy way) the sacrifices he made, he confessed the sins he felt he needed to voice, and we put all of it within the context of the gospel. It offered him the help he needed to defeat the demons inside of him.

In my ministry I have been honored (and humbled) to bring the gospel message to men and women who have served (or who currently serve) in our Armed Forces. It is the closest I come to walking with them. They represent more than I will ever be able to give in that context. It is our veterans who have had to wrestle with the very thing that God asks of all of us – to give more than we imagine we are capable of giving. We call that a *sacrifice*.

For our veterans the word *sacrifice* often means something painful – the loss of time or the loss of direction or the loss of life. Outside of that realm we have made the word *sacrifice* to mean doing what we need to do to reach our dreams or to be the best that we can be. We take something away from over here so that we can reap the benefits over there. However in the context of Scripture a *sacrifice* is offering something of value as an act of devotion to God. I would add to that definition that when we make such an offering it should be without thought of what we will get in return. It is the offering (in and of itself) that is sufficient.

In our lessons this morning we read two stories about two widows and we have too often reduced their message to sacrificial giving. In the Old Testament lesson the widow was down to a handful of meal and just a little bit of oil that made just enough bread for her and her son. And then along came Elijah who wanted her to go ahead and bake the bread but once it was out of the oven she was to feed him first.

In the New Testament lesson the widow was down to two small copper coins which she put into the offering plate. It was everything that she had, all that she had to live on.

For many congregations today is Stewardship Sunday, the one day out of the church year that pastors stand in their pulpits and persuade and cajole and entice all members to give generously to the ministries of the church. With these texts as our guide it is almost too easy to encourage everyone to follow the example of the first widow and give to others first before we take for ourselves. And when we follow the example of the second widow we might be moved to open up our wallets and purses and pour all of our money into our offering plates.

In our context, we live with such abundance that when we hear the stories of these two widows we marvel at the way they gave until it hurt. But if our sacrifices are something of value that we offer as an act of devotion to God ... does it really hurt? Have we lost something of value or (in a much more positive light) have our acts of love built up the body of Christ?

Have you ever given more than you ever imagined possible? You may have noticed that you still had all the things that you needed.

Have you ever given to others first before you kept the rest for yourself? You may have noticed a deep sense of satisfaction.

But the challenge today is to discover how to give all that we have to live on, everything that we have. Images of a widow kneading her last loaf of bread and a widow dropping two small copper coins in the offering plate point us towards something much larger than the amount of money we give on any given Sunday. It raises questions about how we steward our lives so that we are faithful in all that we have and we are faithful in who God created us to be. Our primary measure of the sacrifices we make must not be determined by whether or not we are better off this year than we were last year. Instead, with all that we have to live on, do we offer something of value (as an act of devotion to God) that will help our neighbor?

As we worship God (on this Veterans Day) we see how the gospel message of *sacrificial living* speaks to our veterans, and to people like Jack, and to all of us who are invited to give more than we imagine possible.

Look around as our veterans stand in our midst today and thank them for the sacrifices they made for us in times of war and in times of peace. God cares for these men and women. Offer them words of gratitude that are centered on the gospel message. Then look around again and give to anyone / anything that we have in our possession that will care for our neighbor. Amen