

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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MOTIVE. OPPORTUNITY. GIVE IT ALL.

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Text of a Sermon preached the 24th Sunday after Pentecost

November 7, 2021

I KINGS 17:8-16 | PSALM 146

HEBREWS 9:24-28 | MARK 12:38-44

Given all the criminal procedural shows that we watch as a nation, all the detective novels that are consumed in every culture, I sometimes wonder if it would have been rewarding to get a degree in criminology, or take that one semester in law school where you learn about evidence, suspects, motive, opportunity, and how to look at a crime scene.

Imagine yourself staking out a local business. There has been a disturbance, an event, something valuable has gone missing. You watch people go in and out, transacting their business. You are interviewing witnesses, looking for suspects. Looking for motive and opportunity. A fingerprint. A trace of blood. Asking, did you notice anything unusual this morning? It appears we have an unsolved case, a question in the air, an inquiry in our bones – a cliff hanger.

This morning, we are listening for God's word to us in a familiar word, a Jesus story that has seeped out into the culture, even to those who have never read a gospel. Everyone knows about the widows mite, the two pennies that a woman dropped into the pool of magnificence that was Solomon's treasury, that represents an image of discipleship, of commitment, of true sacrifice, that leaves even Jesus speechless.

Yes. Speechless. You will notice, that aside from pointing to where the disciples should begin their investigation, Jesus has no other comment.

Jesus and his disciples are across from the Treasury. They are watching the scribes in their fancy robes, transacting the business of God. They are watching a widow, who is by definition, someone the scribes need to care about, to take account of. Jesus says: caution. Think it through. There are good leaders of religious institutions. And bad ones. Scribes whose job it is to set up and administer a widows estate. Some take care of what God cares about. Others do the opposite - they leave nothing left. Except their long and empty prayers.

We are standing across from the Treasury. The only thing we know is what we have always known. The rich put in large sums. But now we know this interesting new fact. The widow puts in all she has. But why doesn't Jesus tell us more? What do we see? What moves us?

Perhaps we should more regularly read and hear God's word, each day, with the eyes and ears of a detective. Consider motive. Consider opportunity. Consider time and place. Consider how people are supposed to behave. Watch how people actually behave, what they value, who they honor.

Sure. There is nothing worse than a predatory lender. Nothing worse than a system set up to defraud the poor and enrich those already with more than enough. It will be condemned. It will crumble from its own corruption. But why did the widow do what she did? What is she doing for God. What is she trying to tell us?

Jesus keeps quiet. He has no more comment. He asks us to keep watching. And to look inside the treasury of our heart. Thanks be to God that over all these years in the church I've known people who have showed me the way, both rich and poor, who have shared with me their motive, the opportunity that was before them, and gave their all.

I apologize that I am such an amateur detective. There are so many mysteries here. Elijah came out of nowhere to denounce King Ahab and his idolatrous wife Jezebel. He pronounced a famine in the land, and then had to flee for his life. He ends up surviving only because of the hospitality, generosity, and dare we notice, vulnerability of a widow, not just a widow, but a foreigner who has no reason to help him.

There are mysteries here. Hebrews tells us that Jesus will go on his way and finally give everything, not just forfeiting his life, but bearing the burden of all sacrifices in such a way, that it will not have to be done again.

In Jesus outstretched arms on the cross, the sacrifice for the sin that leads to death has been accepted. We will suffer, we will forgive and be forgiven, we will come close, by God's grace, like the widow, to giving our all, but will not have to bear his shame, his judgment, his alienation from God. In Jesus, nothing, ever again, can separate us from the love God.

The mystery is marvelous. The detective in its keeps at his job. What we do know is this:

- 4 Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help! *
whose hope is in the Lord their God;
- 5 Who made heaven and earth, the seas,
and all that is in them; *
who keeps his promise for ever;

- 6 Who gives justice to those who are oppressed, *
and food to those who hunger.
- 7 The Lord sets the prisoners free;
the Lord opens the eyes of the blind; *
the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;
- 8 The Lord loves the righteous;
the Lord cares for the stranger; *
he sustains the orphan and widow,
but frustrates the way of the wicked.

The mysteries remain. Stand across from the Treasury. Stay close to Jesus. And watch. Look inside, for motive. For opportunity. For what God has put in your hand. For what God cares about.

And give your all.

“For whoever has will be given more. But whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.” Mark 4:24