

“Seeing like Jesus” Mark 12:38-44

And in his teaching he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him and said to them, “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

This is very unusual and also very challenging a reading. Two talks of Jesus, which seem to be dealing with totally different issues. Why would they be recorded together? Why do we have them together in our Gospel reading?

I would like to suggest one possibility about what unites them. And it is – they reveal to us God’s perspective on things. Seeing things like Jesus does. They reveal to us something, that we probably wouldn’t notice otherwise.

We will look at the first part, – Jesus’ warning against the scribes, but mostly I would like to focus on the second part, the event involving the poor widow with her tiny offering.

What comes to your mind when you hear: “Beware of the scribes!” Or maybe we first need to translate it to our today’s situation. How would that sound? Any guesses? What about: “Beware of the pastors!”

Sounds unusual, doesn’t it? But this is what Jesus essentially is saying. Of course, our situation is quite different, and probably today pastors don’t have that many opportunities to devour widows’ houses, or to be honoured in marketplaces. But the warning still stands.

People trusted the scribes. They trusted their vocation. They trusted that they are faithful and would teach them the whole council of God. Perhaps they were quite naïve in their trust.

That must be rather shocking a moment to hear Jesus saying: “Beware of them!” Even if our situation is very different, there still are many similarities. Most Christians trust their pastors.

What I have witnessed is that most Christians think highly of pastors. They trust that all pastors are faithful servants of Jesus who faithfully teach the whole council of God. That whatever they preach and practice must be good and right.

We want to trust, and perhaps sometimes we choose to be a bit naïve. Maybe because it is easier. “If pastors teach something, probably that’s how it is”. But is it so? The New Testament is full of warnings.

Jesus in the sermon on the Mount: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” (Mat 7:15) Paul: “From among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.” (Act 20:30)

They have “the appearance of godliness but deny its power.” (2Ti 3:5) Peter: “There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies.” (2Pe 2:1) John similarly speaks about many anti-Christians who have come out from among us...

The scary thing about all these warnings is that they are not directed to some deceivers out there in the secular world, – they all speak about false teachers among us, in the Church.

And this is profoundly true – Satan doesn't fight in the world, he fights ... in the Church. The world already belongs to him. But if he can lead astray even a single pastor and to make him teach something else than the Bible teaches, then he will likely lead away the whole congregation. It is that simple.

Sure, we want to trust our pastors. We want to believe that they all teach us the whole council of God in truth and purity. But we also need to practice the healthy thing that the people in Berea did: “They received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily [!] to see if these things were so.” (Acts 17:11)

It is no secret that there are pastors and entire churches that have rejected the Scriptures as trustworthy message of the Holy Spirit, as the very words of the Triune God. Many have elevated their own reason, or cultural demands above the Scriptures to determine which teachings to retain and which to ignore.

Many teach “different gospel”. And none of them will come saying: “I don't believe the Scriptures and now I want to deceive you.” No, they come in sheep's clothing, bringing their destructive teachings secretly. Often being the most charming of all people. Sometimes perhaps doing it even unconsciously.

However, we as Lutheran Christians are in this very privileged situation. We have our Book of Concord, we have the Catechisms, on top of that we have our own Theses of Agreement, they all guide us and help us to evaluate the teachings and the teachers that we hear. Let's use them.

Jesus Himself has invited us to abide in His Word, for this is what makes us His disciples. And His invitation comes with this wonderful promise, that by doing so we will know the truth, and the truth will set us free.

Don't take these things lightly, our faith is always under attack. Examine what your pastors teach you, and if you have any doubts, or something is not clear, or you can't find it in the Bible, come and ask. That is your Christian duty, and joyful one at that.

Returning to the common theme for these two speeches, – seeing things like Jesus. We may look up to our pastors like the most Christian people, but, please,

evaluate us in the light of the Word. Help us to remain faithful, that our teaching would come from the Bible, pray for your pastors that we won't embrace false teachings for that would endanger the whole congregations.

Some people may look important in our eyes but may not be so for Jesus. And some people that may look lowly and insignificant can be of great value to our Lord Jesus. Let's examine the other story, the offering of the poor widow.

The text tells that Jesus spent quite some time watching people as they put their money in the offering box. What was He looking at? It seems that He was watching the hearts of the people who had brought their offerings.

Some gave really big sums of money. But then came this poor widow, and she put into the offering box two small copper coins. As we will learn later she gave all that she had. All of it.

What would any financial consultant say? What would any reasonable person say? That's stupid. You don't give money away if you need it yourself. Why would you give so much that there is nothing left for yourself?

Maybe she just wasn't too smart? Which clearly thinking person would do that? We know how to be smart. We need to save. And store. And then to insure what we have saved and stored. So that we can be in control of our lives.

But here we have this poor widow. She does the very opposite. Almost certainly she was one of the least important people in her community. No one would notice her. No one would notice her offering. What would be there to notice? Two copper coins...

How could that matter at all?! But suddenly it mattered and mattered greatly. It mattered to Jesus. For He doesn't look at our appearances, He looks at our hearts. And as He was watching people bringing their donations, suddenly He saw something remarkable.

So remarkable that He calls His disciples. "Come, come here to me, there is something remarkable going on, you need to see this!" Many have given a lot from their abundance, but this widow, she had given more than anyone.

"Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

It is not hard to give from our abundance, from our surplus when we don't feel it. And even that is not completely true. We may have superabundance and think that this is all mine, I have worked so hard to get it, and why would I give it to anyone... why?!

But it is much harder to give when you already are lacking. How did this widow do that? And what did Jesus find so remarkable about what she had done? Can you see what she did?

She showed with her actions how powerful the true Christian faith can be. By giving up everything she entrusted herself fully to God's grace and care. She put her and her life in the hands of her loving Heavenly Father.

This is what the Holy Spirit is capable of doing if only we allow Him to transform our hearts. He creates in us this wonderful faith that trusts that God is our loving Father, this faith that is not afraid to do His will, even if it means letting go control over our lives.

Such faith, true Christian faith has the immense power to transform the world even if it manifests through people whom we may hold as nothing, who are the least in the eyes of this world. Through ordinary people like us.

As we reflect on what the widow did, we may not get it. We may not like it. We may not consider it prudent. But Jesus singled her out from among all the many givers on that day as someone truly remarkable.

Our God can use those who are the least significant and powerless among His children to achieve something grand and magnificent. Ask, how did this poor widow by giving away her two copper coins transform the world?

The poor lady did this little thing. From the depth of her big heart. And Jesus saw it. And then Jesus revealed to His disciples what she had done. And now her self-sacrificial act of faith is recorded in the Gospels.

Now this event has been read, reflected on, and retold again and again already for two thousand years all around the world. What this poor widow did, and we don't even know her name, I am sure we will learn it one day, on that day...

... but what she did has encouraged and inspired millions and millions of her brothers and sisters in Christ to open their hearts and to follow her example, bursting out in such generosity that seems foolishness in the eyes of this world.

Together with Jesus, she has transformed the world. With two copper coins and very trusting heart. We can't even imagine what an impact her tiny offering had made for the sake of Gospel. How many have been able to hear the Gospel and to receive the gift of eternal life thanks to her generosity!

Jesus taught us that "when you give ... do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Mat 6:3-4)

I have been blessed to be inspired by your quiet, your secret generosity. I have been blessed to find out just a few glimpses of what you have done in secret. And I know that there is so much more, so, so much more of this secret generosity, where no one else, but you know what you right hand has done.

Jesus sees it, and He can use our gifts, and together with Him we too can transform the world. And I know that you don't do it looking for the reward. For we already have received our reward by being made members of God's own family. This is just an expression of our gratitude. But still, your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Again.

Remember, Jesus doesn't look at our appearance. He doesn't pay attention to people who may seem important and honourable in this world. He doesn't even look at the size of our donations. He sees our hearts.

I pray today that the Holy Spirit helps us and makes us generous, foolishly generous, so that Jesus could look at our hearts and say: "Truly, truly I say to you, these people have done some remarkable things. Their reward will be great in heavens."

Amen.