

Let's Get to Work
Mark 12:38-44
November 10, 2024
Rev. Leigh Curl-Dove

The chapel was crowded that day. There wasn't an empty seat in the 300+ person chapel. They had even opened the balcony and those who couldn't get seats were standing along the walls. I'd only been at Duke Divinity School for a few months at this point, and I'd never seen the chapel even close to this crowded. But, it wasn't an ordinary chapel service.

The preacher that day was Stanley Hauerwas. Hauerwas is considered one of the greatest theologians of our time. He is the Gibert T. Rowe Professor Emeritus of Theological Ethics at Duke University Divinity School. He is known for his work related to Christian ethics and political theology. You might call him a bit of a curmudgeon, but he cares deeply about following Jesus unwaveringly. He is known for being direct and speaking hard truths no matter the situation. He also is not one to shy away from critique. So, really, you never know what might leave Hauerwas' mouth, so that was one reason the chapel was packed that day. The other reason was because of the date.

It was Tuesday, November 8, 2016.

"I voted" stickers could be seen throughout the room. The anticipation for both Hauerwas and the election results that would come that night, was electric. Everyone was on the edge of their seat. You could hear people discussing their plans for what bar's watch party they were going to that night, complaining that they still had papers due the next day, and discussing what they were going to do for lunch when chapel let out.

When the service began, you could tell that everyone was just excited to get to Hauerwas' sermon. When he got up to preach, silence fell and the entire chapel clung on his every word. He brought a true word and maybe a hard word for some in the room: no political candidate will save us, no democratic process, no amount of votes will save, because only Jesus saves. Christians are called to be followers of Jesus above all else, and that is often at odds with our citizenship. Jesus was never elected, but Jesus elected us saying "come and follow me." Then Hauerwas said something that caused the whole room to jump up out of their seats, there were loud exclamations all over, and I have never forgotten it.

"You need to remember there was a democratic moment in the Gospels, and the people chose Barabbas."

The people chose Barabbas.

Little did I know as I jumped up out of my seat that morning, experiencing a completely silent chapel grow loud and raucous what was to come that night. Little did I know that later that

night I would be in a crowded brewery, without an empty seat, with people standing along the walls, experiencing a loud and raucous bar go completely silent as the people made their choice.

And little did I know that we would be here again eight years later. But, this is the powers and principalities. This is empire. This is America.

This is America.

This is exactly what we see in our scripture this morning. We see a system where a widow, the least among them, the most marginalized, has to literally give her last two pennies. She gives all that she has, leaving nothing for her to live on. All the while the rich and powerful pat themselves on the back for their virtue signaling and paternalistic benevolence, while the most vulnerable among them suffer.

Often, this passage is used to point to the widow as the model for how we should give. The widow is used as a tool to teach us all how we should tithe—what's more appropriate for pledge Sunday, am I right?! But, that's not at all what Jesus says or indicates to his disciples in this passage.

Jesus doesn't say anything to the disciples about giving in the same way the widow does. He doesn't talk about the posture in which she gives the two coins. He states the facts of the situation. Here is a poor widow who is putting in more than anyone else. She gives her final two pennies, all she has left to live on.

Jesus does present the widow in contrast to those in positions of wealth and power, those who are seemingly unaffected or benefitting from this system in place that forces a widow to give her final two coins. They mask the ways they harm and oppress the most vulnerable among them by offering long prayers—using the name of God while they take away people's livelihood.

Sound familiar?

Few things make me angrier than when people use the name of the Jesus we follow to commit violence, stripping away people's basic human rights and dignity: denying gender-affirming care to trans folks, threatening mass deportations of immigrants and refugees, forcing people in need of reproductive healthcare to die, threatening queer people's lives as they know them, continual violence against Black and indigenous folks and other people of color, forcing a specific understanding of the Bible to be taught in public schools, and it goes on and on and on. It might actually be the thing that makes me the most angry—Christian Nationalism—because it is a bastardization of the gospel of Jesus Christ and it is the most vile and vicious form of idolatry.

Jesus has not, does not, and will never support racism of any kind, transphobia of any kind, homophobia of any kind, misogyny of any kind, xenophobia of any kind, violence of any kind, against any of his beloveds.

The widow in this story is the black woman who worked tirelessly canvassing, calling, marching, only to be knocked down again. The widow in this story is the trans kid who is terrified they won't make it out of these next four years alive. The widow in this story is the refugee family trying to make a plan for what they will do if they get sent back to the place they fled for the sake of their lives. The widow in this story is the Palestinian child in Gaza watching U.S. funded bombs rain down from the sky. The widow in this story is the many, many people across our country who are hurting and scared and who have given so much of themselves, everything they had, only to be told yet again, that their lives don't matter.

But, that is not what Jesus says. Jesus unequivocally and relentlessly stands with the widow and every single person she represents. Jesus stands with them and says, "I am in this with you. I will never leave you or forsake you.¹ I am with you always to the end of the earth."²

My friends, I know many of you are angry this morning. I know many of you are sad and grieving. I know many of you might feel like you got the wind knocked out you, and you're not sure if you can get back up again.

But, there are some things that I know beyond a shadow of a doubt to be true.

This is not the end. This is not the last word. The Jesus we believe in and follow is here and he is at work and he will have the last word. He is standing with the most marginalized and oppressed. Showing us exactly where we need to be, exactly what work needs to be done.

We were going to have work to do no matter how the votes came in, but now our work is much more clear. And it might cost us more now, I'm not going to lie to y'all about that. Our work might very well cost us more, and it certainly won't be easy (it was never going to be) but it is good work.

The good news is that though the work is far from easy, none of us will be doing it alone. Even though Empire would rather we think we have to go it alone, we will not. Jesus is there with us holding out his hand to us, reminding us that before we are anything else in this world, we belong to him. We are his followers, his disciples, and that is our primary identity. Our primary identity is not as citizens or residents of the United States of America, but our primary identity is in Christ alone, as beloved, uniquely made in the image of God, children of God.

The work we have to do we will do hand in hand with Jesus and with each other. It's pledge Sunday, a day when we pledge our finances, time, energy for the next calendar year to the

¹ Hebrews 13:5

² Matthew 28:20

church. But this Sunday, on a day where some of us might feel alone, or betrayed, or just plain beaten down, I want us to pledge something to each other. Because Empire wants us to think we are alone, that we stand and work alone, and that could not be farther from the truth

Look around the room. Really look at the people in this room.

Turn to a neighbor, and if you're comfortable with it, take hold of their hand, give it a squeeze and say "I pledge to stand with you. I pledge do the work with you. You are loved and you are not alone."

That's the only way we are going to get through this my friends—together. Hand in hand with each other and with Jesus.

Let's get to work.

Amen.