

Mark 12:28-34, 41-44

Entering the Passion of Jesus: To Jerusalem and Beyond

Temple Teachings: Love, How Much? Risking Challenge

3rd of 5 Sermon Series ~ March 31, 2019 ~ 4th Sunday of Lent

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Introduction to Scripture

Have you ever had a day that seemed like it would never end? For whatever reason--usually not a good one--I think we all have had days that go on and on. Tuesday of Jesus' Passion, the Tuesday of his final week on earth, was so long that it takes Mark (the Gospel writer who never wastes a single word) 115 verses to describe the newsworthy elements of this longest day of Jesus' final week. Just to give you a comparison: Thursday, the day of Jesus' last supper with the disciples, is 60 verses; and Friday, the day of Jesus' crucifixion, is 47 verses.

This 115-verse mega Tuesday could easily have never happened. Just the day before, Monday, (last Sunday's lesson), when Jesus caused a ruckus turning over tables and chairs, we were told that the chief priests "kept looking for a way to kill him." However, they *did not* arrest him right then and there as you might expect. Often a public disturbance like that ends when the police show up and take the offender off in handcuffs. But luckily for us, Jesus' popularity at that point averted his immediate arrest and instead we are gifted with one more long day of teaching in the Temple that would be his last chance to teach in a public setting.

Today we will look at only 11 of the 115 verses. 7 we already heard, where Jesus answers the scribe's question regarding which is the greatest commandment. He answers by reciting the Shema, the core commandment that begins, "Hear O Israel." But not exactly—we'll get to that. Right now you are about to hear the final four. And I don't mean Texas Tech, Virginia, and the other two yet to be revealed today for the NCAA basketball play offs. I mean the final four verses that end Jesus' public teachings on this earth. In these final four verses, Jesus ends his teaching day in the Temple not by doing or saying anything at first, rather we are told he sat down and *watched* the crowd in the Temple.

From among the crowd, a woman caught his attention. She did something that he turned into a teaching moment, using her as his example. What did she do that moved Jesus to lift her up as an example? Surely, she did something very right, but what? Perhaps there was something else about what he saw in her that forged an immediate bond to her. Who knows, perhaps it was she who helped him get through that very long day of what would become a very long week.

Sermon

Did anyone see Lorenzo Cain's top of the 9th inning, game-winning, homer-robbing catch? He caught the ball right at the centerfield fence on opening day. It seemed like he just reached up and grabbed that baseball out of the air as it was gaining speed to clear the fence. Definitely a thing of beauty. Especially for Milwaukee Brewers fans.

How did he do that? One could watch a video of the play and analyze his amazing eye, hand, body coordination and muscle strength that all came together to make that catch. But there's also an element that cannot be seen or quantified. It lies just below the radar that measures velocity and angle. It has to do with trust. He trusted himself enough to put everything he had into catching that ball. Lorenzo Cain held nothing back in order to make that stunning catch.

What the poor widow did that Tuesday in the Temple that day was not that stunning. If Jesus had not been there and not seen what she did, I'm pretty sure no one would have noticed. Her two copper coins, her two lepta, the smallest coin in circulation at Jesus' time, would have made as little difference as one penny that our children may put in their OGHS fish banks. It would not feed anyone even a single meal. And yet, here we are still talking about the "least coin" from the "least of these." Why? We can't know all the reasons why. But here is one: Jesus connected for us the poor widow's with the center point of the first commandment. To put it another way, she scored a grand slam home run with her two lepta.

How did I get from the Milwaukee Brewers to the Shema? Both the poor widow and Lorenzo Cain embody (in their own way) the command that centers on the word ALL. 'Hear O Israel, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' Did you know that, Jesus threw in the "with all your mind" part? That is *not* in the original Deuteronomy text (Deuteronomy 6:5)—the scripture he memorized as a boy in synagogue school. A-J Levine remarks how "Jewish" it was of Jesus to do that—to take a commandment and then extend it to be sure that it is followed properly. ⁱ I'm thinking Jesus did that especially for us Presbyterians, since we tend to lead with our minds and trust our minds over our mushier, squishier hearts and souls.

We can be grateful for the scribe who seized the moment in the midst of all those 47 verses of arguing and asked Jesus to sum it all up into the first and greatest commandment. Loving God with your all and Loving neighbor as yourself. Remembering those two is much easier for our minds than trying to remember all 613 commandments that were recognized by Jesus' time in the Scriptures of Israel. According to the Talmud, (central text of Rabbinic Judaism, written between 200 and 500 CE) there are 365 negative commandments "You shall not kill" for example, "You shall not steal" that correspond to the 365 days of the year, and there are 248 positive commandments such as "Honor your father and mother" or "Remember the sabbath" that correspond to the number of a person's limbs, or parts of a human body, traditionally counted as 248. ⁱⁱ You can see why there was a need to capsulize the essence of the law into the commandment that is the first of all. Jesus gave us two interrelated commandments that boil down to just one verb. Just one action word. One four-letter verb: LOVE.

Why is LOVE so hard to hear, and to remember and to do? I think it's because to really LOVE with ALL we've got (however much or little we think that is) requires what the poor widow and Lorenzo Cain displayed for us: love requires trust. Trusting that God will provide. Trusting that we have something to give. The poor widow was trusting in the Temple system to provide for her, trusting in the God of Israel who is the protector of the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger. And this woman, as poor and dependent as she was, trusted that she had also something of value to give. She chose generosity and she held nothing back. She chose the self-emptying path—just like Jesus—that would lead directly for him, to the cross. In his eyes, her sacrifice perhaps looked like his.

Whatever Jesus saw in the poor widow, we know that it ended the arguing that day in the Temple. For this lesson we can also be thankful. A lesson about the limits of argumentation as a means toward transformation or healing. Although arguing may be entertaining, especially if you are the one who is winning the argument, tell me: when has arguing ever won over hearts or healed wounds? When has arguing over differing interpretations of scriptures been the starting place for opening eyes or unstopping ears previously resistant to a new perspective? Consider "conversations" or arguments you have had with others, especially with loved ones, who hold opposing opinions to yours on hot button

issues such as abortion, immigration, homosexuality, or climate change. Have those conversations yielded greater understanding? Or have they led to hurt, and a doubling down on the issue at hand?

These final four verses show us the limit of argumentation. After 47 verses of disputation, argument, point and counterpoint between Jesus and the authorities in the Temple Jesus was winning each round, “And the large crowd was listening to him with delight.” (v.37b). Yet, all that talk failed to get to the center point—the command to Hear and to LOVE. Spiritual writer, priest and teacher, Henri Nouwen explains it like this, “We cannot love issues, but we can love people and the love of people reveals to us the way to deal with issues.”ⁱⁱⁱ

To love is to hear (Shema); to love is to see another as they are – not as we might like them to be. To love is to trust others to show us truth we would not see otherwise. To love is to distrust our limited opinion of another, and to trust God to surprise us and show us revealed truth in the one we least expect to learn from. To really see and hear another requires emptying, self-emptying. Not just one coin, but both coins. Listening not with just one ear, but both ears. However please hear this: Self-emptying that goes only one way is not love. And it may lead to or turn into abuse. This is never what Jesus is asking us to do in the name of love or trust. If someone is not seeing you, not hearing you, they are *not* loving you. The call for self-emptying does not apply.

I hope you can hear and see this today: Jesus stopped the talking and started watching. The poor widow with the two coins would have been invisible, unnoticed, unremarked upon, if it were not for Jesus seeing her in the Temple that day. Jesus, who would be marked and mocked in just three days’ time. But that day, that Tuesday in the Temple he was calling attention to our inattention; remarking on the unremarkable; noticing the unnoticed. Making the most of the “least of these.” In her, in this poor widow, Jesus perhaps saw himself in three days. Trusting God above all. Like the widow, he would be choosing to give his all. To show us (not argue with us) the way of LOVE. Who are we not listening to? What are we holding back from Jesus? I wonder how long we will keep him waiting.

ⁱⁱ Amy-Jill Levine, *Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner’s Guide to Holy Week*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 2018) 79.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 76-77.

ⁱⁱⁱ Henri Nouwen, *Seeds of Hope: A Henri Nouwen Reader*, (Doubleday: New York, NY, 1997), 233.