

the same way we love our neighbor, is part of the greatest commandment. If the widow felt compelled to put in the last two coins she had, was she foregoing the things she needed just to stay alive—food, shelter, clothing?

Many Bibles translate the verse about the widow's gift saying "she put in everything she had to live on." Which seems to refer only to the money. But the Greek word used to describe what she put in the treasury is the word for "whole." It translates as 'everything.' So perhaps what the widow actually gave was less about the money. Rather, she gave everything; her whole life. This is why the comparison between her and the religious leaders is so stark. She gave her whole life, while they gave barely anything, as they only focused on their own pride, honor, and admiration.

Surely the widow's gift of her whole life is a gift that can only be given in love. Think of marriage, parenting or being an auntie or uncle, chosen families, lifelong friendships. There, we give ourselves to each other and we do it in love, whatever may come. Jesus' life is the fullest illustration of giving one's whole self. That is what the incarnation was about: God giving God's whole self to us out of love. That is what Jesus' death and resurrection will be about: Jesus giving his whole self out of love, refusing to fight back, choosing to offer wholeness to the world not by strength, but through love that looked like weakness. The widow, I think, did love herself—and God, and others—enough to give the fullness of herself to her faith. Loving yourself at the same time you love others can include some sacrifices, some things that look awfully strange to people on the outside. But if anyone could recognize the widow's gift of her whole self, given in love, surely it was Jesus.

This is what we keep talking about this season. Give more than you expect. Offer your whole life. Love with all that you are. This following Jesus is not something we can do half-way. It demands our full selves and the turning over of our lives to what God intends, instead of what we like best. Discipleship is not for the faint of heart, they say. But we are able to live into its high calling because we do it in relationship with a God who loves us. A God who invites us to ask questions, never responding with blind faith, but always with thoughtful gratitude and love, even to ourselves.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



March 10, 2024

Fourth Sunday in Lent

"Love with all your mind and might"

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Mark 12:28-44

As I shared in my article in this month's Church Bell Newsletter, the world feels very Lent-y right now. As in, there are a lot of things that tie in with the lengthening shadows of Jesus's journey toward the cross: wars in the world, tough economics at home, the deaths of loved ones, the challenging politics of an election year, and so on. It can be really hard to know how to process everything. And what are we to do in the face of it all?

In our story today, a religious leader came to Jesus and asked which of God's commandments was first? Which is like saying, *what is the most important thing?* And Jesus responded: love. Love is most important. Love of God. Love of neighbor. And yes, love of self. Love, I think, is the only answer to that question facing us, too. What do we do in the face of heartbreak or death or sorrow? We love.

Our theme this season is *A Higher Calling*. It's a reminder that following Jesus asks a lot of us. Often more than we expect or maybe wish to give. But today's reading offers another view. Though the life of faith is complex, though big questions and hard problems will confound us, what God intends for our lives can still be summed up briefly. Rabbi Hillel, who lived around the time of Jesus, showed how concise the summation of the commandment could be. The story goes that a potential Jewish convert asked Hillel to teach him the entire Torah, or Jewish instructions, while standing on one foot. Hillel didn't miss a beat and said "That which is hateful to you, do not do to others. All the rest is commentary." How you treat people, how you share love is what matters. Everything else is just details. Love for God, others, and ourselves is an idea we can hold onto and one we can grasp. That doesn't mean that *love* is simple. Surely we all know that it is not. But the idea that love is the heart of our faith is fundamental and true.

Karl Barth, theologian in our Reformed tradition, wrote, "Love is the essence of Christian living. It is the [indispensable and essential action] in every conceivable connection. Wherever the Christian life...is good before God, the good thing about it is love."¹

1 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics 1 / 2*, p. 372.

2 Greg Cootsona, "AI and You: Perfect Together?" *Science for the Church* newsletter, January 23, 2024.

3 William Placher, *Mark* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 174.

4 Ibid.