

"out of her poverty...."
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, November 11, 2018
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet, guest preacher
Scripture: Mark 12:38-44

As [Jesus] taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. They he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she **out of her poverty** has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

Mark 12:3-44

Will you pray with me. God of abundance and of poverty, teach us how to give, which is to say, teach us how to live generously. Help us to learn that in giving we receive more than we could ever hope for. Help us to learn to give out of our abundance *and* out of our poverty. Amen.

It's been another week of crisis and compassion, defeat and victory, reluctant acceptance and affirmation, death and lifesaving in our country, hasn't it? The midterm elections with all their costly commotion and meanspiritedness, the horrific loss of life from crazed gunmen within a week's time in a synagogue in Pittsburgh and a country music club in Thousand Oaks, California, deadly fires in Paradise, California *and* in Thousand Oaks, California..... when will it stop? I don't know about you, but I'm having a hard time taking it all in and making sense of any of it.

And today we commemorate and remember our veterans, beginning with those who fought and died in World War I. Today is the 100th anniversary of the 11th hour, of the 11th day, of the 11th month in 1918 that ended the war that would become known as "the war to end all wars." Today at Arlington National Cemetery there will be "a ceremony that begins precisely at 11 a.m. with a wreath laying at the Tomb of the Unknowns and continues inside the Memorial Amphitheater with a parade of colors by veterans' organizations and remarks from dignitaries. The annual ceremony is intended to honor and thank all who served [and still serve] in the United States Armed Forces."¹

I don't come from a military family, but I grew up in Silver Spring, Maryland, which is about a half hour to forty-five minutes drive from Arlington National Cemetery. We visited there a number of times when I was in elementary school, and I can still remember watching the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknowns as if it was yesterday. It happens every hour of every day and every night, every day of the year, year in and year out. It is one of the most meaningful ceremonies I've ever witnessed anywhere in my seventy years.

As I'm trying to take in the news each day, and remembering today to honor our veterans, reflecting on our text from the Gospel of Mark for this morning has been helpful. It's not Jesus' chastising of the pompous religious officials of his day that strikes me. There are still "religious

¹from va.gov.

officials" in our day who parade their religiosity publically and take advantage of their titles. I guess they'll always be around.

It's the "poor widow" who literally gave her last two cents to the treasury, the offering plate, who gives me hope and pause to think about my own giving to others.... in the midst of the tragedies we face continually and the memorials we're called to honor and remember each year. "Out of her poverty she put in everything she had, all she had to live on." (Mk 12:44)

She reminds me to ask myself, "Susan, when did you last give out of your poverty rather than your abundance?" I have to confess I don't like my answer. I can't remember that I've *ever* truly given out of poverty rather than abundance. Have you? I've known a few people who have, one in particular. She reminds me of the "poor widow" of our text for this morning. She's gone now, and so I feel I can share this story with you.

Her name was Ruth. She was a member of our church in Lincolnville forever. She was the church clerk for thirty-nine years, finally having to step down only because her health became more and more compromised from lifelong diabetes. She and her brother had very little of what we would call material abundance in their lives. You could say they lived below the poverty line, but only in monetary and material ways. Ruth's life *was* our church -- giving of herself in ways that knew no boundaries.

As the church clerk, Ruth took it upon herself, every week, *every* week, to write to anyone who had missed church the prior Sunday because they were sick. She would get to church very early and sit in her pew with a little pad of paper and a pencil and write down the names of all the people who came to church that day. Then she would write letters to the ones who hadn't been there and tell them about the service, who was there, and what was going on with her and her brother on their little farm. I didn't really understand the reality of her doing all of this until I received one of her letters when I had a very bad flu and missed church for several weeks. I wish I still had that three page, handwritten letter from Ruth detailing for me what I missed at church, who was there, and saying she hoped I would feel better soon. Ruth gave of herself in every one of those personal letters she sent out over her thirty-nine years as the church's clerk.

In her last visit to the hospital, I visited with her in the ICU. I bent down and asked her how she was doing. She told me she couldn't "go," that she still had work to do. I said, "Ruth, what do you have to do?" And she said weakly, "I have to finish the mittens for the children." You see, Ruth knitted, and knitted, and knitted some more -- mostly mittens and caps for the children of Lincolnville. She was an exquisite knitter. I had a pair of her mittens. I wanted to bring them with me this morning, but sadly I've lost them somewhere. I used to keep them in my car under the driver's seat, as much to remember Ruth's generosity as to keep my fingers warm while I drove in the winter. Ruth gave out of her poverty right down to almost her last day. She wanted to finish the mittens for the children that year.

When she died, I officiated for her graveside service in the "upper cemetery" in Lincolnville. I cut little pieces of the multicolored yarn she mostly used for her mittens. I told those gathered that if anyone wanted to, I would give them two pieces of the yarn -- one to put in their pocket or purse to remember Ruth and the other to toss in the hole where the blue cardboard box of her ashes were placed. I really thought maybe only the women at graveside would take me up on my offer. But every person, older man, older woman, younger man, younger woman, stood silently in line and took two pieces of yarn and thoughtfully placed one piece in their pocket or purse and reverently threw the other one into the hole with Ruth's ashes. It was a

memorable moment, one I'll never forget. Out of Ruth's lifelong material poverty came her priceless gift of giving to the last breath to those who wanted to remember her at her graveside.

Ruth is *my* role model for giving out of one's poverty. She is *my* reminder that I can do the same for others. How about you? Who is *your* role model for giving out of their poverty rather than their abundance?

On this Veterans Day, when we are called to honor and remember all who have served their country in military service....

on this day when we can't know what crisis or chaos we'll hear about and have to face in the days to come....

on this day when too much abundance *and* too much poverty is all around us....

may we remember *our* place *in* all of it, our call to serve *through* all of it, our love to *give* in the midst of all of it.

Let the people say, "Amen."