

St. Luke's Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
25th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 27B) – 10 & 11 November 2018
Mark 12:38-44

Each year, clergy and lay representatives of every Episcopal congregation in western Kentucky gather for a convention. It's was held at St. Paul's in Henderson last night and today (Friday night and yesterday), and this gathering offers an awesome opportunity for our diocesan family to be present with one another and celebrate the undeniable reality that each person, each parish, participates in something bigger, something much greater than our own local life.

Much happens at convention, but for me, the most inspiring part of the whole experience is Holy Eucharist, where we stand and praise God as one joyous Body. To that end, it is customary to preach the Bishop's sermon from that service in congregations throughout the diocese, to give us a deeper sense of connection with our brothers and sisters in Christ spread far and wide. So let us hear the words of our Bishop, The Right Reverend Terry A. White, first spoken this (yesterday) morning at the 191st Convention of the Diocese of Kentucky.

A sign posted at a polling place on Tuesday read as follows: No Campaign Material or Clothing Allowed in Polling Place. There was an especially long line at this polling location. Turns out that by following those instructions, Republicans and Democrats looked quite a bit alike, in the end! (Perhaps we can build on that?)

Sir Kenneth Robinson, an expert who has taught and formed educators across the globe, has a theory that we are all born with an abundance of creativity, each and every last one of us. He praises those educators and institutions that nurture creativity, and has a far less generous opinion of those who demand uniformity of the most uncreative order.

In his lectures, Sir Kenneth often tells the story of a six year-old girl in an art class. She was deeply engaged in her drawing, and her teacher took special notice because it seemed like this girl rarely paid attention in class. But here she was, fully engaged in this drawing lesson. The teacher was fascinated, and walked over and asked her, “What are you drawing?” The girl replied, “I’m drawing a picture of God.” The teacher responded, “But nobody knows what God looks like.” The girl replied with sure and certain confidence, “Well, they will in a minute.” (adapted from A Picture of God, the Rev. Susan Ironside, from 2018 Book of Sermons, Episcopal Preaching Foundation)

Mark’s Gospel today tells us that Jesus is on the Temple Mount, watching the comings and goings. The imposing edifice of the Temple in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus was a marvel, soaring above the Temple Mount: an impressive sight that surely was indeed home to the Lord of Hosts. Jesus gathers the disciples. Perhaps they had gone wandering about the precincts alone or in small groups. Maybe they had found the ideal spot to open a small pack and eat some bread and fruit. Jesus beckons them to come back together. He has two things to say.

The first is chilling. The Gospels are unified in their witness that Our Lord saved his strongest rebukes for people like me – a religious figure. Jesus talks about such people being shown deference for the wrong reasons. And he goes deeper. These leaders are preying on the most vulnerable, represented by the widows, the very ones God’s people are commanded to especially care for, widows and orphans, the poor, the stranger and the alien, the leper and all who are marginalized and scorned. Jesus says that these religious predators walk about in long robes, are greeted with honorifics, have the best seats at worship – do you see why I get the chills? (And this isn’t even the passage that talks about them wearing purple!)

But then Jesus responds like a dedicated birdwatcher and devotee of John James Audubon who spots the rarest of birds – and very much in contrast to his scorn of the aforementioned religious figure – Jesus gestures with delight and awe toward a widow who gives her very last penny. “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.”

It is as if Mark is on the same page with the 6 year-old girl artist: People will know what God looks like in a minute. What God, God’s people, God’s mission looks like is this widow, and not like the predator/manipulator in religious clothing. Giving our all, holding back no portion of life from God’s mission is the response we make once we are baptized. Further, you and I are most human created in God’s image, our most redeemed and renewed selves, as we give and serve and empty ourselves.

And what of the type of person that Jesus first pointed out? He said that their behavior of robbing widows was not made right because they dressed in religious garb and claimed a certain position and privilege. So-called religious leaders who foster hate and prejudice and violence, and claim to do so in God’s name, abuse the trust that has been placed in them and paint a false, blasphemous portrait of God. And when people of faith are silent in the face of evil and violence that denies the God-given dignity of every person, they side with the oppressors.

Jesus was asked what does all the law and the prophets come down to? He replied, “The first commandment is to love God with everything you have, and the second is just like it, you love your neighbor the same way, as you love yourself.” Everything else must be measured by those two commandments. The widow personified that answer. Jesus points to her because she is the authentic expression of God’s love – giving everything.

For countless people, the hate and prejudice espoused by a so-called religious leader and religious group paints the only picture of God they know. Jesus points out to his disciples what the reign of God looks like in the widow, and definitely what the reign of God must not look like. More specifically – Jesus says, Terry, mirror the widow: what else can you completely give to me?

Jesus says, Diocese of Kentucky, what else of your life needs to build my reign in this world? And to all of us as individuals, congregations, and as a diocese: be the antithesis of the false religious folk, and model compassion, justice, courage, reconciliation, and generosity as being essential components of loving neighbor as self.

Last month I made a visitation to one our congregations, and as service time was approaching, a woman who I'll call Sally walked in as I was getting ready. She spoke to the Bishop's warden, who in turn asked: Sally has been coming for some time. She wants to be confirmed. Is that ok?

I said, Well, there should be weeks of classes and she should read ...no I didn't say that! I said, Of course. I announced that we were having a confirmation, gave the new page numbers, and Sally was confirmed. In fact a few others came forward to reaffirm their commitment to Christ and receive the laying on of hands by the bishop.

After the dismissal all in the nave gathered around Sally and we took a picture. As folks headed into the parish hall I asked Sally why she came to this parish. She told me that she started because she had a good friend who was in her late 80s who attended the Episcopal Church, and she would help her friend on Sundays. Her friend invited her to come. Now I also went to my church, but something kept bringing me back.”

When I inquired further, she said “The first sermon I heard was on God’s love.” I then went to my church, and the sermon was on God’s judgment. A few weeks later I was here again, and the sermon again was on God’s love. At my church, I again heard something different altogether.

Sally paused. “You know, once you get used to hearing that God loves you more than anything, no other sermon really sounds right.”

Sally said, “So when I heard you were coming today, I thought, Well, now I’ll finally hear about judgment and rules to follow or else. But you said, sure I could be confirmed. And bishop, yesterday I ran into a friend who attends my old church. She said something not so nice about us ‘Episcopals’, and then told me, You’ll be back, but you’ll have to be rebaptized. I said, Honey, I love you, but I’m now an Episcopalian because I know that God loves me. Why don’t you come with me?”

God’s love is put into action in that small congregation as they worship and take part in numerous community outreach programs. They model the widow that Jesus points us toward. They care. They love their neighbors, and joyfully focus on being a community of Jesus followers.

I see that everywhere I visit. I wish you could see it too. Every Sunday, every day, in your own lives, in the life of your congregation, and in our common life in this diocese, pictures of God and God’s love and God’s people are drawn and painted in a rainbow of colors. And hope is given to those in despair, light shines in someone’s darkness, the bondage of sin is broken as grace grabs hold, and hate is vanquished as God’s love transforms us all.

When that art teacher had waited a minute and got to see what God looked like, the two things she remembered long after that day were: God wore a huge smile, and God's arms were in the form of a hug, embracing the artist.

At this convention may we feel God's embrace in this holy sacrament and in the sacrament of fellowship with one another. May we reflect God's smile to all. This is how the reign of God grows. We were born to creatively love God and our neighbor. Let us be the widow, and go all in. Amen.