

*This is the Time*

A Sermon on 1 Kings 17:8-16 Mark 12:38-44 by the Rev. Philip Major

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For the past year, we have been reading passages from the Gospel of Mark, almost every Sunday. Three weeks from today a new church year will begin for us, and we will begin reading from the Gospel of Luke. Before we leave the Gospel of Mark let's consider what we learned about Jesus and God's way from the Gospel of Mark.

In Jesus' time, individuals were separated into clearly defined groups, based on their social status, gender, religion, and family of origin. People had tribal allegiances that superseded everything else. Jesus invites each and every person to leave behind their tribal allegiances in order to become members of God's family. Jesus is inviting people to become members of a family where they will be treated as equals in the eyes of God. This invitation is very attractive to the common people, because Jesus is offering them something they have never experienced before.

What else have we learned from the Gospel of Mark? Back in chapter two, Jesus was teaching in someone's home. As usual, Jesus was surrounded by a dense crowd of people; it was standing room only. Then a small group of people came, carrying one of their friends on a stretcher. The man was paralyzed. But they couldn't get into the house because there were so many people inside. So they climbed up onto the roof and dug a hole through the roof and lowered the paralyzed man. Then Jesus heals him.

The story illustrates one of the main ideas of the Gospel of Mark. People are desperately in need of healing. The religious and political leaders were failing miserably when it comes to taking care of God's people. The religious and political leaders did not see themselves as servants of the people.

Especially in the Gospel of Mark there are sick people everywhere. Even the people who are not really sick or suffering from a disability are clamoring after Jesus. They are desperately in need of something that Jesus offers. God's way brings wholeness and joy to life.

In the Gospel of Mark we learn that God is deeply concerned for the well-being of all people. In Mark we learn that healing and health are not supposed to be for one group of people; all people are equal in the eyes of God. God's intention is for goodness and health and freedom and respect for all people, not just for the men, not just for the Jews, not just for the Christians, not just for one group of people.

In the Gospel of Mark we learn that, even though we are peace loving people, there is going to be a struggle. Always. There is going to be a struggle between leaders who grab more power for themselves and those who follow Jesus' way, which is the way of empowerment for all people.

In the Gospel of Mark we learn that those with power will violently resist God's way of equality and empowerment and health for all people. The clearest example of this is the crucifixion. The Gospel of Mark includes the most ancient account of Jesus' crucifixion, and it is brutal and terrifying. Jesus really suffers, because the people with power really want him to suffer. In the Gospel of Mark the brutality and violence of those opposed to God's reign of equality, empowerment, and freedom is the point.

In today's Gospel passage, from chapter twelve, we are just two chapters before Jesus will be arrested and put on trial. The conflict between God's way of equality and empowerment and the selfish, self-serving ways of the religious and political leaders is coming to a head. In today's passage *Jesus 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!"*

Sometimes people who walk around in long robes choose Jesus' side in the struggle. Sometimes they follow Jesus' example of empowerment and equality. Sometimes, but not always.

Jesus critiqued the religious leaders, because they had the opportunity to choose the right side in the struggle. Many of them chose the wrong side. Many of them were grabbing power, instead of empowering the people.

Jesus said, *They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.* You might be wondering exactly how the scribes managed to devour the wealth and the houses of the widows. Let's remember that women did not have many rights in Jesus' time. Few girls and women were granted any sort of education. According to the rules of the time, when a woman became a widow she needed a man to manage her financial affairs. If the woman did not have a brother or other relative to do this, she might have entrusted one of the scribes with the task of managing her finances. This gave the scribes an easy way to steal money from widows. In some cases the scribes stole so much money from the widows who trusted them that the women became homeless.

There is going to be a struggle between leaders who grab more power for themselves and those who follow Jesus' way, which is the way of empowerment for all people. You might have noticed that many of our children and grandchildren have given up on the Christian church. There are some very good reasons for that, and the main one has to do with the warning Jesus has just given about the religious leaders.

For at least sixteen centuries, many leaders in the Christian Church have chosen the wrong side in the struggle. Priests and bishops have blamed the victims of violence and oppression, rather than taking their side in the struggle.

Sixteen hundred years ago this book was published. The author was Augustine of Hippo, and the book is called *City of God*. I spent a lot of time reading and studying *City of God* because it laid the foundation for much of what happened in the Christian Church for the past sixteen hundred years. In *City of God* Augustine finds a way to put the blame on the victims of violent crimes. Augustine places the blame on women and girls who have been raped. For the past sixteen hundred years many leaders of the Christian Church have taken the same side as Augustine, blaming the victims, telling those with very little power and respect to give up the shreds of power and respect they once hoped for.

Jesus would not be surprised. There is a continuous struggle between leaders who grab more power for themselves and those who follow Jesus' way, which is the way of empowerment for all people.

In the next paragraph we come to one more lesson from the Gospel of Mark. Jesus *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. Then 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."*

Jesus says the poor widow is contributing more. In Jesus' story the poor widow has more power. Jesus' way brings an upside down perspective for looking at the world, and for looking at power. That's because Jesus' way is the way of empowerment and equality for all people. It is backwards from what most people expect.

If you spend time around the people who are taking Jesus' side in the struggle you see this kind of backwards power happening all the time. For example, much of the work that gets done at St. Paul's is done by people who are either widows, or people who are poor, and some of them are poor and they are widows. And they are powerful.

God's power works in a way that is different than we expect. God gets God's work done by empowering those who are given very little respect and honor in the world. In his upside-down perspective about the contribution of the poor widow, Jesus is drawing on a peculiar strand of ideas in the Hebrew scriptures.

In our story from the book of Kings, God sends Elijah to Zarephath. God tells Elijah to rely on a poor widow in Zarephath for hospitality. According to the assumptions of Elijah and Elijah's people, this is upside-down and backwards from what they would expect.

Zarephath was dangerous territory, even in the best of times. There was a drought all through the region, and food was getting scarce, most people were poor even before the drought, and most people in Zarephath were poor, and almost all of the widows in that time and place were very poor. On top of that, the widow was not a member of the nation of Israel. She was a foreigner and she was a woman, so to Elijah's people she was considered to be a potentially very dangerous person.

God's commanded to Elijah to go to Zarephath and rely on the poor widow, who is a foreigner. And yet there is an upside-down sort of power in her story. God gives great power to the person we assume will have no power. Notice that for Elijah and the widow, the demonstration of God's power came at the very worst time. The famine was terrible. People were starving. The widow was absolutely certain she and her son would die of starvation. Yet in that moment, God gave the poor widow the kind of power she never expected. Nobody, not even Elijah, expected to see the greatness of power given to her.

God has also given you great power in this time. This might feel like an especially terrible week of your life, but God has given you great power. That truth has never been clearer to me than it is this week. This might feel upside down and backwards to you, but I'm pretty sure your potential power to be a beacon of God's love and God's truth has never been greater or more important than it is this week.

I hope you know the prayer of St. Francis by this point in your life, because this is our St. Francis moment. You might not have thought this was going to be the point of your life, but I get the feeling that everything else leading up to this time has been preparing you and preparing me for this moment in our lives. This is the time for us to make a choice about whether we are taking Jesus' side in the struggle or just give up.

This is the time for us to make that choice every day about whether we are working for the equality, the health and empowerment of all people or whether we are choosing the other side. This is the time when it makes the most difference whether we choose to treat all people, including those who might be called foreigners, as equal members of God's family, deserving respect, honor, and freedom. This is the time when it makes the most difference for us to be little beacons of God's love for the people around us.