

God's Math

Two weeks back, we stepped away from our lectionary reading in the Gospel of Mark. We did so because it was Reformation Sunday and we looked for a few moments at the life of Martin Luther. Do you remember? We asked if he, literally, was mad. Was he? Well, he certainly had an over-developed conscience that drove him to extreme religious behaviours: observances, fasts, confessions. If anyone could have been saved by their monastic devotion, it would have been brother Martin!

Those behaviours could even have been called obsessive. I'm not making a clinical diagnosis here, by the way. I'm no therapist and Luther cannot be diagnosed by anyone nearly five centuries after his death. But the intensity of his monastic life is well recorded. In fairness, he wasn't *that* extreme for the time, but in today's standards, he was extreme.

Not only that, but the nearly never ending condemnation of his conscience led him to violent moodswings. He could reach the heights of mystical extasy when, after confession or a vigil or a mortification of some sort, he felt as though he was close to God. That he had by his efforts acquired enough merit to garner God's good grace to get him the rest of the way to eternal life. And he could reach lows that nearly paralyzed him when he realized that no observance was good enough, no absolution would last long enough, no pardon would cover the next sin that he would inevitably commit.

What must I do to inherit eternal life? We've run into that question already this year. Remember the rich young man? It was his question. And we found that for him the cost was too high. When called to give up his idol of wealth, he went away sad.

That was not Luther's question. Luther would have given it all away. Indeed, he did! That's one of the reasons why his father Hans was so upset with him. Luther's question was more modern. More psychological. More conscientious. "How will I know that I've done enough to show myself worthy of God's grace?" He wasn't so much concerned about works as assurance. When would he cross the line that would give his spirit peace and quiet the condemnations of his heart? And how would he know that he had done it?

This is the question that simmers in the background of our Gospel this morning. We're back in the Gospel of Mark, but we are still wondering about eternal life, about God's grace, about how we know when we've done enough. Let's go further.

Background

It is the Wednesday of Holy Week. Jesus has entered Jerusalem in the manner of the Messiah to the peoples' delight. Instead of kicking the Romans out, however, Jesus set his sights on the Temple and cleansed it. He chased out the money changers and the sacrifice sellers. He has continually confounded his enemies, the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Scribes. He's gotten nowhere with them. No matter what they were arguing about, it all came down to authority. Would Jesus bend the knee to their authority or would they bend the knee to his? And finally, on Wednesday, things have come to a head.

Jesus calls the people to him, in the Temple courts mind you. The Temple he cleansed a mere three days before and says, “Beware the scribes!” The last public words of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark are a warning to the people about the scribes. How sad is that! The leaders of the people of God would not repent and believe the Gospel. And so the best Jesus could do, in his final public teaching, was to tell the ordinary citizens of Jerusalem, to steer well clear.

To understand why this is such a damning indictment, we need to look a little closer at the scribes. They were the elites of the elite. They knew how to read and write (hence their name—the scribes). They were charged with passing the Law, the Word of God, from generation to generation. They were the interpreters of the Law. They were the ones continually figuring out how best to apply God’s commands to their day and age. They were the religious scholars. And in a “theocracy,” such as even Roman occupied Judea still was, that meant that they also were the lawyers for applying God’s law meant judging infractions, or at least those infractions that the Romans didn’t care much about.

All this to say, they were, or should have been, the heroes. In the Marvel Universe, there are superheroes like Powerman and Jessica Jones and Iron Fist and Daredevil. Then there are Earth’s mightiest heroes—the XMen and the Avengers. If in Jesus’s day, the Pharisees and Sadducees were like the first tier of superheroes, the scribes were the next level up. They were the Avengers. They were the X Men. If you want a military metaphor, these guys weren’t Army or Navy. They were the Rangers or Seals. If any should have seen Jesus coming, it was these guys. And listen. It was not that they could not see him. They come under Jesus’s judgment because they *would* not. And so all Jesus can do regarding them is say to the rest, stay away.

Jesus from here on focuses his teaching on his disciples alone. And he draws their attention to the the widow. Who is she? No idea. She’s not Ranger material. She’s not elite. She’s not even ordinary. She has and is nothing. No husband. Presumably too old to remarry and no children to care for her in her old age. She is one whom everybody passes by and nobody sees. Yet when she passes by the coin box at the temple treasury, God the Son, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Word through whom all that is came into being, saw her. And though she did not know it, he held her up as an example to his disciples. She is commended. She is, in her anonymity, remembered. She outgives the scribes.

A Study in Contrasts

The Gospel for this morning thus gives us a study in contrasts. The scribes are wealthy. They walk around in long robes. Robes that signify a great deal that we’ll get to in a minute. But for now, it’s enough to say that very few could afford such robes. Jesus would have had similar robes, but as a countryside religious teacher, they wouldn’t have been anywhere nearly as impressive as these city scholars. They were wealthy. The widow on the other hand had nothing. Her “all” was two small copper coins. 1/32nd of a denarius—a day’s wage. That was the sum of her wealth. She had nothing.

Not only did they have it all and she had nothing. The scribes were somebodies. They had Fame. They were greeted in the marketplaces. People recognized them. I can recall my brushes with fame: shaking hands with Brian Mulroney after his landslide win in 1984. Bumping into Joe Clark on Metcalfe Street in Ottawa. Meeting the Excellence of Execution, Bret the Hitman Hart in Pearson airport. To meet a scribe in Jesus’s day was to meet a famous man. And you used the right

title. The widow? She was nobody. Nobody to notice. Nobody to care. Nobody to protect. She was passed over.

Third, the Scribes had status. They got the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts. The widow? She had no seat. No feast. No status.

But listen—even if the scribes were devout with their long prayers, Jesus loathes them. As the guardians of God’s law, they knew that the widows were marked for special care. As those who fell through the social safety net provided by husband and sons, they were not to fall into nothing. They were to be the object of special care for the whole community. And this widow had no family. This widow had no wider community care. She was numbered among those whose homes had been devoured by the very religious experts who should have known better!

Get the picture? The scribes and the widows are two extremes. But the greatest extreme is yet to come.

As we move from the temple court and the public teaching to the temple treasury and the private object lesson, rich people are seen putting large donations into the temple treasury. It is a different scene, but we are to read the rich here and the scribes above as cut from the same cloth. These people contributed some. The widow? The woman whose net worth was 1/32nd of a day’s pay, she gave all.

Think of it this way. When the great and the good of our day gather at galas to be parted from some of their gold for this or that good cause, do you think they actually miss the tens or hundreds of thousands they give? Millions, even? Hardly. When Mrs. Smith, who lives on her CPP and widow’s pension gives \$100 to World Vision, she gives far more relatively speaking, doesn’t she?

God’s Math

In our Lord’s contrast between the wealthy scribes and the poor widow, we have a glimpse into God’s math. God is not interested in half measures. God wants it all. One million? Ten million? One hundred million? If it’s less than all, it’s not enough! All is the only amount that matters. And for people like the young monk Martin Luther, people who need to know how much is enough, that is bad news. Because it means we can never buy off God.

Schindler’s Despair

That realization is what drove Luther, and those of us who stop to reckon seriously with the holiness of God, to the brink of madness. No amount that we can give aspires to the all that God requires. Our situation is like that of the hero Oskar Schindler who, at the end of the war, felt that in spite of all he had done, all the Jews he had saved, he could have done more. Listen to the Schindler’s words as uttered by Liam Neeson:

“Goeth would have bought this car. Why did I keep the car? Ten people right there. Ten people. Ten more people. This pin. Two people. This is gold. Two more people. He would have given me two for it, at least one. He would’ve given me one, one more. One more

person. A person, Stern. For this. I could have gotten one more person... And I didn't! I-I didn't!"

Schindler had done so much, but it wasn't enough. Luther had done so much but it wasn't enough. We all can do and do and do and do. And none of us will attain to the widow's "all." None of us will have done enough.

What must I do? You must do it all. When will I know? When you've done it all. All is the only amount that matters. And none of us can.

God's Gift

Now, maybe now, you can hear the good news. All of our gifts cannot equal God's gift to us. All we can do is render to him and to our neighbors the love that he has given us in Christ. In just a few moments you are going to hear seven of the most beautiful words in the English language. Do you know what they are? "This is my body, given for you."

Let's modify that shall we? This is all of my body given for all of you. When Jesus gives himself to us in the Eucharist, he doesn't hold back. He who lacks nothing. He who is only abundance. He who cannot be added to or diminished. He's the one who gives his whole self to us in with and under the signs of bread and wine. Our Catholic brothers are not far off when they say the Eucharist is the Body and Blood and Soul and Divinity of our Lord. He gives us all without remainder.

Dear friends, that is the good news. It is the very best news! The God we cannot buy is the very same God who will not be outgiven. We cannot outgive God. The all of the Lord Jesus is the all that is asked of us.

If the bad news is our works cannot buy off God, the good news is our works cannot outgive God.