

RUTH 3:1-5, 4:13-17 (p. 211)

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MARK 12:38-44 (p. 825)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Lord, be generous today as we study your Word. Pour out wisdom and knowledge and understanding freely upon us. Bless us with gifts from above, so that we might internalize them. And then, become a blessing to others. In Jesus' Name we ask this, Amen.

"THE WIDOW'S MIGHT"

I've discovered over the years that a great way to approach Scripture is to ask questions! "What does it say?" "What does it mean?" "What does it mean for me? For us?" Jesus is warning us today. "Watch out for the Teachers of the Law. They parade around in Long Flowing Robes, and take the most important seats in the Synagogue". What does that say? What does it mean? What does it mean for me, for us?

You know, it wasn't that long ago that I wore a robe and stole to preach! And I always sit up here in the front of the sanctuary on Sunday morning! Do you think the Lord is talking about me? Well, actually, yes! But I remember serving on Jury Duty a while back, and seeing the Judge in a Long Flowing Robe too. We all had to call him "Your Honor" when we spoke. And stand up when he entered the courtroom! Not unlike the Elders and Choir by-the-way, waiting for the Pastor to be seated! So, is the Lord talking to that Judge? And again, to me? Yep!

But I'm not one for long, showy prayers! And I rarely sit at the head of the table at a potluck or banquet! I really don't like being the center of attention, although Deb might disagree! Are you sure this warning applies to me? Yes! But I don't think I'm alone!

What does it say? What does it mean? What does it mean for me, for us? Jesus is talking about hypocrisy here. Saying one thing but doing another. And there is plenty of that to go around. The Lord is warning us against an unhealthy focus on self, as well. Being inauthentic. Striving for respect in the market place! Honor at banquets! Attention! Kudos, especially if undeserved! Maybe you can you think of other examples?

There were a number of elections this week, if that helps. And some pretty important votes across the Nation. Pundits and Politicians were all over the news! Did any of them seem a bit showy to you, or arrogant, or narcissistic? Deb and I visited Washington DC on Sabbatical. It was, by design, a very impressive place! Huge marble buildings! Statues everywhere! Limos lining the streets! But if you could buy up some of those egos for what they're worth, and then sell them for what they think they're worth, you could spend the rest of your life in luxury! Maybe even run for political office yourself!

Business Executives might be a modern-day equivalent. Instead of Long Flowing Robes, think shiny, three-piece Giorgio Armani suits, or a Donatella Versace Dresses! Or how about a third-world Dictator in full military garb, or the king of some Banana Republic! Picture a Movie Star walking down Rodeo Drive! Or a Sports Celebrity, up on the stage!

I'll bet if you try, you could come up with all kinds of examples of inauthentic! Not to mention hypocrisy! Maybe even a few not that far from home! I think it's human nature, don't you? Which is likely why Jesus warns us against it! People sometimes act in a particular way, simply because others are watching! Maybe you've noticed? Maybe you've done it yourself? It's an easy trap to fall into! Even Peter changed his outward behavior, in order to impress people around him!

Peter had had that vision, remember, up on the rooftop. In it, God told him that no one should be considered unacceptable, or "unclean". And afterwards, he and Barnabas started hanging out with Gentiles in Antioch on a regular basis! They ate right alongside those "uncircumcised" folks, all the time! But then, when a delegation of Jewish Christians came from the Capital, Peter reverted right back to strict Jewish Dietary Laws! And the Apostle Paul called him out on it!

Peter, you're being inauthentic! I can smell the ham on your breath! I know there was a time when you wouldn't eat ham as part of your hope for Salvation. But then, after you trusted in Christ, you realized that it didn't matter if you ate ham or not! But when the "no-ham" eaters came from Jerusalem, you jumped right back to your Kosher ways! You're pretty inconsistent you know! You're compelling Gentile Believers to observe Jewish Law, even though you know "Salvation is by Grace alone"! And Paul didn't just pull Peter aside and tactfully presented the issue to him in private. In Galatians 2:11, Paul says, "I opposed him to his face"! And in 2:14, "I said to Peter in front of them all"!

I guess it's a pretty common problem! Again, maybe why Jesus warns us about it! So, can you remember of a time when you fell into that trap? You know, changed your outward actions, put on a mask, just for show? For honor maybe, or personal gain? Because that's really Jesus' issue in today's text!

Think about it! Our mission, as the Church, is to make disciples, right, teaching everyone to obey Jesus! But the biggest stumbling block to that, the single biggest complaint that those outside of the Church have for those inside the Church, is that we don't walk the walk! They say we're hypocritical! Inauthentic! Running around in our Long Flowing Robes! Maybe you've noticed?

That word, "Hypocrite", actually comes from ancient Greek plays. A "Hypocritos" was an actor, one who would wear a "smiling" mask to portray a Happy Character. And then run back stage to don a "frowning" mask in order to convey Tragedy! I'm sure you've seen those masks symbols in movie logos or on Broadway! The question is, do those who look through the windows of the Church actually have a point? Do we, indeed, wear masks? Pretend to be something we're not?

One of my all-time favorite Preachers, Chuck Swindoll, tells of a time when he was challenged by his sister to wear a rubber mask in the Pulpit to illustrate this text. He said he couldn't do it. But he did wear it to a speaking engagement shortly thereafter.

“Without any explanation,” he said, “I just stood up and began to speak on being authentic! There I stood, pressing on, making one statement after another as the place came apart at the seams! Why? Everybody knows why! My mask cancelled out everything I had to say!” ...It makes you think, doesn’t it? It’s like the old saying. “Be who you is, not who you ain’t! Cause if you ain’t who you is, then you is who you ain’t”!

Jesus and His Disciples have come to the Capital, Jerusalem, the very seat of National power and identity, the symbol of everything that Israel represents! They are in the First Century, Middle Eastern equivalent, of Washington DC! And boy are they impressed! They are impressed with the great stone walls that surround the entire city, keeping everyone safe! They are impressed with the aqueducts, the water supply system, that provides more than enough fresh water for everyone to drink, even here in the desert! They are impressed with the extravagant lifestyles! Robin Leach could have had a field day here! The Disciples are Galileans, from the rural areas up north! So, the “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous” in Jerusalem has simply put them in awe!

Mostly though, these would-be followers of Jesus, are impressed with the time-honored religious system. “Master,” they say, “just look at those Scribes and Teachers of the Law! They have spent their entire lives studying Scripture! Look at their Long Flowing Robes! Notice their public acclaim!” “Master, look at these impressive stone walls that visually cause the Temple to almost rise up to Heaven!” ““Master’, isn’t this wonderful!”

And it was, to be sure! The Great Temple of Jerusalem was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World! History calls King Herod, “Herod the Builder”, because of his impressive construction projects! The Disciples are impressed! But it’s all about the show, and the showmen!

The Temple is glorious, magnificent really! The Priests are wonderful, classy and brilliant! The music is First Class! Wow! This is cool! Which is when Jesus warns them. “Use caution here boys. Things may not be what they seem. Those long prayers you hear are actually just for show. And this apparent piousness that you see, well, that’s to get good seats at the banquet!” “That huge demonstration by the wealthy of stuffing cash into the Temple Treasury, well, that’s just theater!

“On the other hand, that widow over there, the one by the window dressed in rags, she is who you want to be like. Did you notice her drop those two copper “Mites” into the Collection Box just now? They are worth almost nothing on the street. But I tell you, what she has given comes from her heart. It far surpasses what everyone else has done! She has given everything she has!”

The Disciples are impressed, all right. But what they are impressed with, is power and prestige, majesty and might! They are enthralled with the “show”! And unfortunately, that still happens in Churches today! But what Jesus is impressed with, is one woman’s commitment and dedication! What the Disciples value are riches and splendor. But what Jesus values is a pure heart!

What the Disciples notice are the “Things,” all the “Things”! But what Jesus notices is a woman, whom we might not have even noticed at all, had He not pointed her out! She is a socially marginalized person, a Widow, someone who doesn’t really fit in. But Jesus honors her! Honors her commitment! Honors her heart!

Widows had it bad in the First Century World. We talked about it briefly last week. Every day started with sad possibilities! A Widow had no one to protect her, and no one to support her economically. Historians tell us that women couldn’t inherit. And few women were allowed to work, especially widows. Those who did, often had to do laundry, or sewing, or work the streets! And those were the fortunate ones! A woman who lost her husband was suddenly in dire straits, unless of course she had sons who could take care of her. But if not, she was most likely destined for a life of begging!

This reality was so harsh, in fact, and so prevalent, that Jewish society created laws to help. Maybe you remember? If a man died, for instance, his brother was supposed to marry his widow and take care of her. And if the husband had no brothers, then a cousin or an uncle, or maybe even a nephew could take his place. It was called the Law of “Guardian” or “Kinsman Redeemer”. A relative would “redeem” a widow from her plight by marrying her!

That’s actually what is taking place in our lesson this morning from Ruth! Boaz, a second or third cousin has shown favor to a poor widow named Ruth by marrying her! And by extension, shown favor to her mother-in-law Naomi as well.

And it all worked out quite wonderfully! We know the story! And if not, it's written right here for us to read. But just imagine if there were no relatives around!

Those two small copper coins that lady dropped into the Temple Treasury was a fortune to her! We cannot even grasp the magnitude! Not really! You can see why she is often lifted up as an example of generosity, especially at Stewardship time! You can probably see why she is celebrated as an example of faith too?

That widow's trust in Almighty God—in His Providence, in His blessings—that He would take care of her—is absolutely astronomical! You can see the truth, can't you, that her actions that day were a bold witness to her commitment to God, and to His ministry in the world! Imagine giving all you have in dedication to the Lord! Everything! I think I'd call that, the "Widow's Might"!

So here is the thing! Jesus' lesson, actually! A good one for Stewardship Season, I might add! How do we use what we have—our power, our might, our pittance? How do we use it in sacrificial ways for others, as opposed to, for self-aggrandization? How do we use the blessings that have been entrusted into our care to further the Kingdom of God?

Think "money" for a moment, because Stewardship is partially about money! There are over nine hundred more references in Scripture on what to do with money than there are references to sex! But just think about all the Church arguments over sex! So, think money! It's important!

But also think “time” as well, because how you prioritize that, also applies! We haven’t all been given the same amount of money, or the same talents, or the same experiences even! But we have all been given the same allotment of time! So, how do you use your “one hundred and sixty-eight hours each week”?

There was a Sociology Study, years ago, that broke down the life of an average, seventy-year-old male. It said that roughly twenty-four years of his life would have been spent sleeping. Another fourteen years working, and eight years in amusements. Six years were spent at the dinner table. Five years in transportation. Four years in conversation. And three years in education. Another two years studying and reading! The other four years of his life was spent on what the Study called “miscellaneous pursuits”.

It then went on to break down those four-years of “miscellaneous pursuits”! Forty-five minutes were spent in Church each week, and five minutes in daily prayer. Which works out to a “not-so-impressive” five months of his life given to God! And if that man wasn’t average, but instead was a faithful churchgoer—one who attended Sunday school each week, and three, one-hour Worship services—he would still have spent only one year and nine months of his seventy years reaching out to God!

I read that study in Seminary, twenty-some years ago. So, I wonder, with Facebook and Twitter, video games and I-Phones, HGTV and Sports Channels, Live Streaming Movies and 24-hour News, if things have actually gotten worse! What do you think?

How do you spend your time? It would be interesting to track it, actually do the math. Take a pencil and paper, and write it down. Figure out how much time you spend on various things! Then look at what percentage of your one hundred and sixty-eight hours a week is devoted to God? Remember, Jesus said, “What good will it do for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?”

Make no mistake, Jesus is looking for a commitment! He wants no part of being treated like some troublesome visitor! You can’t just open the door of your heart a crack, and peek through! And then try to get rid of His intrusion as soon as possible! What the Lords wants from each of us, demands from each of us, is a real commitment! That’s why He is so impressed with the Widow!

Listen, because there is a theme! “Have no other gods before me!” “Give up your life and follow me!” “Take up your cross daily!” “Whoever wants to be first, must be last, the servant of all!” And notice that when it came time for Jesus to demonstrate His commitment to the Father—as well as to us—He stretched out his arms and gave it all!

So, about those two little coins you have in your hand! And about the time you have on your hands! And about your hands themselves! What could you accomplish for the Kingdom, if you truly dedicated them to God? And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

We are here Lord! We stand before you, less than perfect, bathed in sin and failure, and filled with problems and fears! And yet we are here Lord! We bow before you, hoping and praying that you will accept us anyway, and knowing in our hearts that you already have! Thank you, Lord. We trust you. And we trust in your Promise of Eternal Life. We trust in your offer of Eternal Fellowship with you. We accept your commitment to each of us through the sacrifice of your Son, Jesus Christ. And we offer our commitment in return. We believe in your faithfulness Lord, even when we fall short in ours. And we thank you for this great Gift of Grace!

Father, we come before your Throne of Grace today in order to find rest, to experience your Peace, and to place those we love into your Infinite Care. We come before you to celebrate your Blessings, and to thank you for our lives, and to Praise and Worship your Holy Name! We've have come Lord, for the very reason that we have life, in order to make you known in the world! And we have come to lift up before you in prayer, those who are in need. Please be with..... Father, we especially lift up our Veterans and their families today. They are the Brave, so that the rest of us might live Free. We lift up ourselves as well, and our Church, asking for your Guidance and your Care. We lift up this County and this State, this Nation and this World, asking that you will lead us into the future that you have in store. And we lift up our leaders, Lord, those whom we agree with, and especially those who we do not agree with, asking for your Blessings in their lives, and your Spirit in their hearts. And Lord, we do this now as your Church, as we pray together the prayer that Jesus taught us, saying, Our Father...