

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
November 10, 2024
“When You’re At Your Wits’ End”

1 Kings 17:8-16
Mark 12:38-44

I don’t know about you, but as for me, I am at my wits’ end. I feel daunted at the prospect of finding words to preach for the next 4 years, and feeling a *deja-vu* from a cycle of preaching that began 8 years ago, where I felt a strong responsibility to respond from the pulpit to the things this country’s rulers were saying and doing, and at the same time feeling a tremendous *ick* that the princes of this world should set the agenda for our holy conversations. Shouldn’t *God* do that? I want to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our president-elect is not Jesus Christ, so why should he set the terms of what I preach? But Jesus Christ also turned over the tables of the temple when the temple was acting in collusion with the forces of power and greed. I will try my best to be faithful to the gospel, and today I think the Spirit will allow me to let loose some frustration and grief.

My spouse warned me to consider that some in our church— not many, but likely a few, judging on the voting statistics of this area— voted for someone who I did not vote for. If that is you, I’m *glad* you are here. It gives me hope that we in this country can find our way to one another. I ask that you hold with you the lament and fears that I’m about to bear and that many of your fellow worshipers feel.

In the past week I have listened as parishioners have shared their fears that their immigration status, or that of their loved ones, will no longer be secure. I have spoken with LGBTQ members and their families who fear their rights will be taken away. The Queer Parents Facebook group to which I belong has been flooded with questions about moving from a red state to a blue state, or even moving to another country where their rights are more secure. I also see many questions from families wondering how to do second parent adoption, because they have legitimate fears their families will be torn apart. And I hear well-intentioned clergy proclaim that they are willing to marry any same-sex couple before January, so that people in love can secure their rights before the

new administration takes hold. This saddens me— that the covenant of marriage, which should be entered into with thoughtfulness, care, and intention, should become a shotgun marriage, with our president-elect holding the shotgun, because people are so panicked about their rights. I've spoken to friends whose daughters have been told by their male acquaintances, "Your body, my choice!" In my own daughter's school, immigrant children last week called out to each other, "You're gonna get deported!" I can understand them trying to make sense of these times. My seminary friend and classmate Dr. Melva Sampson, who is a professor of preaching at a prestigious North Carolina university, shares that some kid posted a sign saying "Colored People Only" above the water fountain in her daughter's school. Melva is a black woman who has the highest degree in her field, and yet she cannot protect her black daughters when they are at school from receiving the kind of racism her grandparents endured in the Jim Crow South. In our own church, parents of black and brown children wonder whether their kids' civil rights will be respected. I have spoken with church members who rely on public assistance, who worry they will lose their benefits. Not everyone will be harmed by the coming changes, it is true, and it is likely that some in this congregation may even become wealthier. But the policies on the table are ones that make the rich richer, and the poor poorer. Like always, the church will be stretched to cover the distance of care that our society chooses to ignore. It's what we *do* as Christians; it's in our nature. But that doesn't mean that it should be solely the job of the church to fill in the gaps to care for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the hopeless.

And often, it is the poor or the widow who gives sacrificially to help others. The Philanthropy Roundtable estimates that low-income individuals give 4-5% of their income to charity, while high-income individuals give 2-3%. That does not take into account those who have come here from other countries and through their hard work here are sending money back to their country of origin that is a lifeline to multiple family members and loved ones, or the low-income apartment building with neighbors who offer free childcare to one another because they know the a struggling parent cannot afford to pay a sitter.

When I consider the offering of two widows in our scripture passages today, I feel a mixture of gratitude and discomfort. As I imagine the widow from Mark's gospel, I can picture her walking to the temple treasury and depositing her two small, copper coins. Jesus said it was "everything she had, all she had to live

on.” Part of me wants to tell her, “No! Save that money for yourself! Buy a half a piece of bread and enjoy one last meal, or save it in case someone donates two more coins to you, and you can have a whole loaf of bread, so you can eat half today and half tomorrow.”

But the widow made her choice of her own free will. She gave that money to God. Perhaps she remembered the story of the widow of Zarephath, and how God cared for her. In that story, this woman had only enough for one last meal to prepare for herself and her son, before they die of starvation. Somehow, Elijah convinced her not to be afraid, and to share. She served Elijah, and God rewarded her by replenishing her oil and meal until the famine was over. That story gave her courage to hope for things not yet seen, and to be generous.

What I want to ask the widow who fed Elijah, and the widow who gave her last 2 coins to the Temple’s treasury, is this: How did you muster the will to give when so much had already been taken from you?

I take heart from a story my college friend Stephen shared this week. Stephen is a transgender man who lives in Asheville. His property was damaged during the flooding from Helene, and so he has some temporary government assistance to help with the damage. Here’s what Stephen wrote the day after the election.

“Today I went to the Asheville Sam's Club to buy my Uncrustables that I dutifully eat for lunch every day with my Disaster EBT card. I am grateful for this card and the ways it has helped us replenish our food over the past couple of weeks.

I didn't think about going to the Sam's Club the day after the election, but when I arrived I was greeted by many a person sporting American flags, MAGA gear, and Trump paraphernalia. This is not unusual at this Sam's Club, but seemed particularly pronounced today. Maybe I was just noticing more.

I did my shopping, selected my Uncrustables, and rounded the aisle to an older white woman in a Trump shirt who asked me to help her get her frozen chicken thighs out of the freezer that she couldn't reach.

I don't know the stories of all the folks who shop at the Sam's Club, but I do know there are a lot of mountain folk who rely on discounted bulk food to get them through each month. A lot of these folks don't live in Asheville proper.

The person who asked me to help her looked tired. A lot of people in Asheville right now still look tired. I paused for a minute looking at her and looking at her Trump shirt and reached up for the chicken and handed it to her. I smiled at her, asked her if I could help her with anything else and told her I hoped she had a good day.

For almost 40 days, the people of Asheville, and particularly people in the mountains surrounding us, have been helping one another out. It hasn't all been rosy. But for the most part, we have relied on each other. People are tired. *Poor* people are especially tired.

I don't know, and maybe I'm just trying to comfort myself, but I don't think that woman who needed help getting her chicken hates me. I know my humanity was weaponized by the right to get people to the polls. And yet, there is a part of me that just doesn't believe that that older Appalachian woman buying 40 frozen chicken thighs cast her vote because she believes I shouldn't exist.

I'm open to the reality that I'm totally wrong. But what I've seen in this region after this hurricane tells me otherwise. And maybe I'm still in naive lala land, but I don't think so. This election wasn't about poor white people hating trans people. It's so much more than that. Or at least I think it is. I hope it is.

I'll keep helping folks reach their damn chicken at the Sam's Club and I hope you'll help me out when something's out of reach for me. I've seen over the last month that folks will.”¹

I am nervous about how my rights will be affected in this new administration. But I suspect I will have it easier than my transgender friend on public assistance living in Western North Carolina. Still, he is the one who had enough wits to offer me and others enough hope in the humanity of this country to sustain these times when hope feels hard to come by.

The writer of Mark knows how futile that poor woman's gift was; Mark was written after the destruction of the Second Jerusalem Temple in the year 70 CE, almost 40 years after Jesus' death. And in the next chapter of Mark, which we will hear next week, Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple.

¹ Thanks Stephen Wiseman for letting me share this story!

Here we have this woman giving everything to an institution that will be gone in a matter of years, and yet Jesus takes notice of her. She has given the Temple the last of her life, and the Temple's life cycle is almost over. However, when Jesus looks over at the scribes in their long robes, and the best seats of honor, he realizes the Temple is not doing what God's mission requires. I am sure the scribes were responsible with money. You could probably count on them to balance the checkbook without going into the red. But a woman who gives everything will go on being poor because these same scribes devour widows' houses rather than care for the poor. That makes the scribes' gift worthless, and the widow's gift priceless.

Jesus calling the Temple leaders to take note of the widow's radical generosity calls them into accountability, to consider how they have neglected the clear responsibility of scripture to care for the widow, the orphan, and to break the bonds of injustice. It should today make us do the same.

As the Psalmist notes, we cannot wait on princes and rulers to enact justice here on earth. This is a calling we have to work toward no matter who is in power. Christ's call for us is today, and every day, work to see that God's kingdom comes, God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

If this is a day, if this is a week, when you do not feel you have enough wits to do that, you have come to the right place. We do not have to be our own siloes. We are not on our own. In the church of Jesus Christ, there is enough faith, there are enough wits, for all of us. It may come from a widow. It may come from a child. It may come from the older person who has seen it all. It may come from the person who was a client of the food pantry and started coming to church. *These* are the people who make us rich. Let us do right by them. Let us do right by Jesus Christ.