

Hastings-On-Hudson
Rev. Julia Brown
“Provisional God”

Texts: Psalm 146
Mark 12:38-44

Right off the bat, I want to ease any fears you might have that today is some kind of a surprise stewardship Sunday: that with Pastor Emily away, she has called in a guest preacher who will stealthily come in and dole out a heaping helping of guilt in calling for the coffers to be filled - to give a hard hitting message about sacrificial giving and meeting budgetary goals, so that this congregation and the church at large can continue to be financially relevant and generous in the community and the world.

Now, that’s not to say that there isn’t a time or place to have conversations about congregational giving and financial commitments. Nor is it to say that this gospel passage isn’t highlighted from time to time when one finds themselves in such a time or place. But, rather to say that I’d like for you to join me in

considering what is beyond just the mere dollars and cents value of coins and contributions.

It can be tempting to zoom in on the latter verses here from Mark and try to paint a nice neat picture of “giving it all to God.” But, is that really all that Jesus cares about or what he is getting at with highlighting this one widow’s offering? Is he speaking to some kind of test of faith...that God will give you everything your heart desires and will hand deliver all necessities, if you would but just give God everything you have?

Eh...that’s sort of a slippery slope into prosperity Gospel land, which can end up sounding something like: God’s rewards are merely material...tangible trinkets and life’s luxuries...and go to those who earn God’s favor somehow through their so-called “faith/good deeds/righteousness/etc.” I won’t get much into that today, but, if that were the case, then why is a *poor* widow seemingly the protagonist of the passage? And, we are, afterall, in the same chapter of Mark where Jesus is put to the test about paying taxes...with that proclamation about “giv[ing] to the emperor the

things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

I will say that this bit from Mark, and a brief bit within today's Psalm, can read somewhat like a cautionary tale. The first words of Jesus in the Gospel passage do begin with "beware." So, of what exactly do we need to beware or be wary? And what does that have to do with God's provision?

Does it have to do with wealth, even if not from a prosperity point of view? Giving up all "earthly" riches in order to open oneself to the riches of God?

The poor widow is indirectly praised for her actions by Jesus, and in other places throughout Scripture we hear of God's favor for the poor, the widow, downtrodden, the outcast. So is it in being exactly that, poor and a widow (double whammy), that she is somehow inherently more righteous than the rest?

I don't think it is quite that either, nor do I think that somehow a life fraught with suffering is *the* path to righteousness, or the premier way to experience

greater faith, or curry favor with God. Nor do I think that there is some hypothetical rift or division between the heavenly and earthly that ranks one so, so far separate and above the other. I mean, we don't read in the creation story that God looked at all that was made and said, "eh, it's just, like, well, ok. What is really good though, is me, myself, and I...up here!"

Much like the test on taxes, this passage speaks more to "the powers that be," the human driven systems of power, greed, and privilege, at work in the world than to some distinct good/bad division between the heavenly and earthly realms and their riches.

I digress.

"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! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers."

Jesus isn't necessarily saying that wealth or status in and of themselves are "bad," but rather that often the ways they are gained and maintained...specifically at the expense of others...is what's condemnable.

Sure these rich folks are gifting large sums of money, yet, perhaps they are making sure that the number of zeros on their checks are visible as they pass the plates, or maybe they loudly repeat the numerical value of their contributions to the ones keeping the records. But, what do those amounts amount to for folks in their situation? For someone who might have a net worth of a billion dollars, what is a couple thousand?

Yet, here is this widow, a woman who has lost her husband in a world where men are the ones who make a living and have a say in society...poor, meaning no one else (that is any other male family member) has stepped up to take up her care and be her voice, or, maybe no such person exists to do

so...giving all of the meager amount she has to live on to the treasury of the synagogue. Why is that?

Maybe it is precisely because she herself knows all too well what it is to be in need and to rely on others to meet such basic needs.

Yet, for the ones who have much, comparatively, not much is given. They can pat themselves on the back and congratulate and compare notes with others of equal status for how generous and benevolent they all are being, all the while perhaps not even noticing the existence of this widow in their midst. Or if noticed, perhaps looked on with pity...from a comfortable distance of course, rather than with personal and engaged care, concern, and investment.

After all, these might just be the ones who will come after her for not meeting the standards and obligations set by those like them, which she has no means of achieving, as there are barriers in place given her situation, which are also set by those like them...

Let's jump back to a portion from the Psalmist:

“Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals...”

Boy oh boy have we put a lot of time, and attention, and trust, or lack thereof, in such things over the past few days, and weeks, and months, and years...to infinity and beyond.

And so, as we consider this week and the coming months the changes in leadership of our country, no matter what your opinion of the outcome might be, we are reminded that life is lived and gains its beauty (and more!), not by being all consumed by the powers that be, or will be, or were, but in remembering that they are temporary, and that God's reign is forever - that we are a part of something bigger than ourselves.

If we stay solely focused on holding onto power, or on who is holding onto power, we box ourselves into a narrow perspective of the possibilities of life.

Yes, God invites us into participation in the care and cultivation of God's beloved world, which passes some power our way, but not merely for power's sake or competing with each other to see who can have the

most...whatever. After all, as the children's song goes: God's got the whole world in God's hands.

Now, this is not a free pass to slip into a posture of apathy, as if our actions and agency don't ultimately matter...they most certainly do! But rather, it is a shift or re-focusing of perspective from the immediacy of “me and mine” and the “here and now” to beholding the breadth of who, where, how, and when we consider someone “our neighbor.”

God calls us into this participation, not so that we may achieve power and privilege and status and wealth for our own satisfaction, but so that we may delight in and foster the flourishing of all of what God has seen is good.

As we sing the next hymn [Great is Thy Faithfulness] this morning, I invite you to reflect on what you need now, or have needed in the past, and what has been provided...on how and when these things, or people, have shown up.

I've found that often it is when we look back on past experiences of our own need, or allow ourselves

to become more viscerally aware of our own fears and concerns, those times when we might fall to our knees, that we are more clearly able to see the hand of God at work in the “what comes after.” Perhaps not right away or even remotely close to it, and not in necessarily logical ways, or how we would have hoped things would have gone, how we think is right, and just, and fair. But in so doing, we can often practice patience and kindness and become more able to perceive abundance and provision in real time, to continue to lean into and trust in God’s provision.

It can be all too easy to overlook true provision when all is hunky dory because our needs are satisfied and we don’t want to break that level of comfort by opening ourselves to the needs of those around us. And, when we view the world through a lens of scarcity: of limits on, well, everything, we cling to anything and everything we can...seeking to enhance our control, power, comfort, status, standing, and more, even at the expense of others...whether we are aware or not. And, when we do so we miss out on the

abundance of blessing and resources given by God, not just for some, not just for you, or you, or you, or you, or me, but for all of God’s creation.

This poor widow is not somehow more righteous by anything she has done or not done, or by the circumstances of her life. But Jesus knows her need and the needs of others, and so does she. And, her life and giving and living are shaped by that, and how she can give of herself in the compassionate care of others, and a trust that at the end of the day, all she has *truly* needed God has provided.

Attentiveness to how steadfastly provisional God can be, not just in our own individual lives, but for the infiniteness of God’s reign, fosters a shifting of our focus. And in so doing, there is a “freeing up” to see the world and engage with our fellow human beings in such a way that we can be agents of God’s provision: sewing seeds of hope, bringing about joy, living in love, and being peacemakers.

Let it be so. Amen