

Reemergence

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on November 7, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Church

As [Jesus] taught, he 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! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

He 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. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." (Mark 12:38-44, NRSV)

Sometimes it's hard to believe that we're already in November of 2021. I've said to many of you that if 2020 was the *slowest*-passing year ever, 2021 has surely been one of the fastest. But either way, this unprecedented time has seen the world change around us, and we are changing. Some may regret this, but I don't, for this time is forcing us to re-assess who we are and what our purpose really is. And if somehow all this draws us closer to the mind and will of Jesus, then it has been time well spent.

This truth came home to me in a unique way recently as I participated in my monthly ministry cohort group by Zoom. It's an opportunity for support and ideas and growth, and especially as this pandemic has lingered on, it has come to mean a lot to me. We had a speaker with us who was both compelling and deeply disturbing at the same time.

He asked us to engage in a simple exercise: To think of the greatest problems facing our own congregations and to name them out loud. As with any such open question, and especially one laying bare our own vulnerability, responses were slow in coming at first, but then as one or two spoke, others followed. The answers we offered would not likely surprise you:

- *We don't have the number of members that we used to.*
- *We aren't attracting and retaining visitors.*
- *We create programs that we think will be interesting, but then not many people attend.*
- *We have conflict in our congregation, and we can't seem to overcome it.*

As I said, the answers wouldn't surprise you. But what probably *would* surprise you was what our speaker told us next. He understood that all these things are real problems, and that they don't have easy fixes. But he said, "Here's the thing: For the people *out there* ... the people you hope to reach and attract and enroll into membership and then put on a committee ... those people *don't care* about your problems. *They don't care about your problems.*"

That was jarring to hear when put so bluntly, but then evoked some embarrassed laughter – because it was and is the plain truth. It struck us with the force of revelation: That what we might regard as the biggest problems facing our congregations *don't* matter one bit to the people that are presumably the solution to those problems! That our unspoken message to the community at large is “Please come help us with our low membership” ... “Please come and help bail us out of our financial woes” ... “Please come and bring some new blood into our church so that we can run some committees.”

It all sounds pretty ridiculous, doesn't it? But that was the point: Our focus is in the wrong place. It's not that lower membership or having trouble with attracting visitors or enduring conflict are not real problems. Of course, they are. But when the primary focus is on the maintenance and survival of the organization and not on the *mission* for which the organization was organized, then we've lost the plot.

Today, we begin our Fall Stewardship emphasis in worship. Our theme as we look ahead to 2022 and, we pray, a post-COVID era is *REEMERGENCE*. Notice that it is *NOT* “Restoration,” for if all that the last two years have been about is going back to the way things were before, then we will have missed the point. We will have missed what the Spirit is calling us to see, to do, and to be in the days to come. On three successive Sundays – today, the 7th ... next Sunday, November 14 ... and then November 21 – we will journey together through the scriptures, buoyed up by some inspired music, and ultimately, re-dedicate ourselves to Christ and his mission.

Today, we consider this short account from the gospel of Mark in which Jesus sits opposite the Temple treasury and watches the crowds as they offer their gifts. Among them are wealthy givers, who bring large sums for the coffers. But then, in stark contrast, comes a poor widow who gives two small copper coins, which *together* make a single penny. And Jesus is moved, calling his disciples together and saying, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

In some ways, this text may seem naturally suited for stewardship, in that it displays acts of giving – large sums even. It would be easy to spin a giving message out of all this. Of course, it would be even easier to draw a contrast in the levels of piety on display here, between the comfortable who give what they can afford to give away, and the poor widow who gives her *whole livelihood* away in an act of total commitment.

Of course, no one who hears (or preaches!) this message today is going to walk away from here doing like the poor widow, and so what's left but to *romanticize* the woman and lovingly admire her total – if completely impractical – devotion. This is, in effect, how this story has been read through the centuries – as an image of a beautiful and utterly un-realizable ideal, with perhaps a bit of admiration for the simple, heartfelt faith of the very poor.

But this understanding (aside from being wrong!), obscures the real challenge of the story. The clue is in the verses which immediately precede the part where Jesus is watching people drop money into the treasury:

As [Jesus] taught, he 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! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."
(Mark 12:38-40, NRSV)

Long robes ... long prayers (long sermons?) ... we can chuckle about how it hits a bit close to home, but it's clear that Jesus is not laughing when he thinks about the show of institutional religion and its easy compromises with comfort, privilege, and position. Everywhere in the gospel of Mark, Jesus is talking about servanthood, and the first being last and the last first, and yet everywhere in his world, that is the *last thing* he's seeing from religious leaders and religious people. Instead, he sees religion existing for itself.

You see, there's more going on here than Jesus wistfully admiring the devotion of a poor widow. There's also a *lament*, but even more, anger, that there even *is* a poor widow who has no more to live on than two small copper coins, but who nonetheless feels that she *has* to give something. The very institutions built to *glorify* God in their observance of God's Law to care for the widow and the orphan and the alien only served, in their self-concern, to ignore and discard them.

The most urgent questions facing the church today are not about institutional survival, but about *identity* and *purpose* and *calling*: Who *are* we? Why are we here? This all may sound very simple, but these questions, taken to heart, involve a complete re-framing of the real issue. If we see our core problems as membership and money and participation, then there's no real difference between us and a friendly community club that hopes to attract a few more people to help keep it going for a while.

And by "we" and "us," I'm talking both about the American mainline church in general *and* our own congregation, because just like me and my ministry colleagues in the cohort, we're all in the same boat. We're all facing the same cultural tides, and we've all been experiencing the same difficulties that impact congregational viability and effectiveness.

But what if we look again? What if our *biggest* problem is that we haven't seen our *community's* biggest problems as our own? What if our biggest problem is that we're asking the Spirit to bless our efforts, but are *not* asking where the Spirit is moving ... not asking where the brokenness is? Because biblically speaking, where the brokenness is, *that's* where God is.

Is it generational poverty within our reach? Is it illiteracy and the lack of quality education and opportunity for so many near us? Is it loneliness and a sense of isolation among a sizeable

portion of our older neighbors? Is it food insecurity – the alarming fact that children and adults within only a few miles of us go hungry every day?

This is not about being all things to all people. We help no one if we spread ourselves too thin and try to address every need. There are too many of them. But as Oscar Romero once said, “We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do *something*, and to do it very well.”

The gracious call of the gospel is a call beyond a preoccupation with our own problems and a call into the needs of others, and this is where we find our purpose and mission! Our faith teaches us that it is in those broken places where *Christ* is to be found. And where Christ is, there is the hope of new life.

The last (almost) two years have taken us through some tough times. They have struck at the heart of the bonds which hold us together and which make it possible for us to do anything. COVID exposed just how easy it is for us to lose connection and how easy it is for some to get left behind. For this reason, our Session voted a few months ago to become a member of the Matthew 25 Initiative of the Presbyterian Mission Agency. One of its key aims is building greater congregational vitality, that churches like ours may grow a more effective presence and ministry toward those most in need in our larger communities. We pray for the blessing of God – manifest in stronger ties of love, care, and inclusion among us – that we may BE a blessing to those beyond our walls.

In this spirit, we are living into some simple, new practices for growing in love and vitality, and so providing a fuller, richer spiritual support system for one another, including opportunities for us to build our connections with one another, monthly Communion for those who desire it, and visitations for church members and friends, especially those most at risk of isolation. Doing these things makes our body stronger and more ready for *mission* and service, which we see as integral to our worship life. This conviction is manifest today: connecting our commitment to ACTS (Area Churches Together Serving) – serving the hungry in our community – with our celebration at the Communion Table!

As we share together in the Bread and the Cup, we also remember all who are hungry, who lack “daily bread.” This is why we have started this new tradition of bringing items to donate to ACTS on Communion Sundays, usually the first Sundays of a month. ACTS always accepts donations of food, clothing (Fall/Winter right now), and monetary donations – and all are appreciated. We will then bless all donations as we celebrate Communion together, united in the love of God which binds us all together!

And thus we begin this three-Sunday journey. We will explore further what our “reemergence” means for us ... what it looks like in our life together, in our worship, fellowship, mission, and outreach. Make no mistake: Living into this reemergence, this work of the Spirit, is not something that “just happens” or is someone else’s responsibility. It is, for all of us, a call to

action and to commitment of our time, talent, and treasure. Over the next few weeks, prayerfully consider what answering this call means in your own lives and join us for worship. We will dedicate our pledges on Christ the King Sunday, November 21.

Know this: 2022 is a year in which we do *reemerge* as a community of Jesus followers who have been through the crucible of upheaval and change and come out the other side as a body refreshed and renewed to be faithful to Christ, the King of Kings.

To the glory of God! Amen.