

Lent, a Time for Transformation

This season of lent is about being with Jesus on His journey to the cross. It is the process described in Mark 8:34, where Jesus presents the challenge: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." But the question that occurs to me this morning is: what does this self-denial, shouldering the cross, and following Jesus look like in practical terms? What does it mean for us to live out the challenge of Lent?

It seems to me that our Scripture readings from Mark this morning identify three areas for personal and corporate transformation, three ways in which God is seeking to change us and bring us closer to the heart and character of His Son, Jesus Christ. The first of these three areas for personal transformation is discovered in the movement from me to we. The closer we come to the cross of Jesus the less we focus on our selfish wants and the more we focus on caring for one another. It is the movement from me to we, from self to community.

Our Scripture reading today gives us three clear pictures, one after the other. The first is a picture of the teachers of the law, also known as the scribes. Jesus sharply condemns their attitudes and actions.

Mark 12:38-40 say, "As he taught, Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely."

Jesus condemns the teachers of the law for two specific things. First of all, He condemns them for their pomposity, for their showiness. These men like to be seen as religious and intellectual superstars. They want to be recognized and honored in public; they want to be seen in the most important seats in the synagogues and be honored at banquets. Jesus says they make lengthy prayers for show. In other words it's all about them, and a lot of it is about the appearance of them. They like to look at themselves in the mirror. They like the appearance and feel of their scholarly robes. They like the sound of their own voices. They live with a sense of entitlement, believing that the titles they hold earn them the respect and privileges they crave.

The second charge Jesus brings against the teachers of the law is found in the first phrase of verse 40. Jesus says, "They devour widows' houses." David McKenna, in his commentary on Mark writes of this

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verse: "As one of their functions, scribes serve as consultants in estate planning for widows. Their role gives them the opportunity to convince lonely and susceptible women that their money and property should either be given to the scribe for his holy work or to the Temple for its holy ministries. In either case, the scribe gains personally." In the first case he gains a personal sponsor. In the second case he receives a finder's fee for raising money for the Temple. Jesus blasts the hypocrisy of those who pretend to be religious while at the same time using their privileged place to squeeze money from the poor. Hell is especially prepared for those who engage in such practices.

The contrast between the heart of the scribes and the heart of Jesus could not be more striking. Jesus is going to the cross to lay down His life for others while the Jewish scribes are padding their own pockets and furthering their own careers by stealing from the widows. But, the question that comes to us today is, where are we in this picture and who are we closer to? Are we more about me or more about we? Are we more focused on our own welfare or are we focused on caring for others? **If anyone would follow Jesus he must deny himself, take up her cross, and care for others.**

The first movement in lent that we identify this morning is the movement from *me* to *we*. The second movement that we discover this morning is the movement from *outside* to *inside*; it is the movement from concern with outside appearances to inside realities. The second picture in our Scripture lesson today is opposite of the first. In the first picture greedy men steal from the poor. In the second picture a poor woman honors God by giving freely from her poverty.

Mark 12:41a says, "Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury." In the Temple in Jesus' day, they didn't pass the plates for an offering the way we do in our services today. Instead there were brass or bronze containers, with trumpet-like mouths, that lined the wall of the treasury room. Some of the containers were for coins and others received various kinds of goods. The worshipers gave their offerings on the way to worship. It was done in public and anyone who wanted to watch could get a pretty good idea of what was given. The latter part of verse 41 through verse 44 say: "Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything--all she had to live

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on."

Calling attention to the giving of the poor widow who gives her last penny and contrasting her action with that of the rich that gave a great deal more, Jesus teaches us how to measure our giving. Giving is to be measured--not by its count, but by its cost to the giver; not by its amount, but by its proportion; not by what is given away, but by what is kept for oneself; not by money, but by spirit. Man looks on the outside of himself and others and judges by outward appearances, while God looks upon the heart.

As we move through Lent and draw near to the cross, we need to search our hearts. Are we making progress toward giving and serving because we have discovered that God loves us and we want to show our love for Him in return, or do we do what we do to make ourselves look good in the sight of others? Are we seeking the applause of men or living for the applause of heaven?

It's interesting to me that in His last week on earth, Jesus would choose to talk about money. Actually, Jesus' observations about those who give from their abundance in contrast with those who give from their poverty, is the fourth mention of things having to do with money since the Triumphal Entry. You will remember back in Mark 11 that Jesus over turned the tables of the moneychangers and drove the merchants out of the Temple. He said "My house shall be called a house of prayer but you have turned it into a den of thieves." Then in Mark 12, Jesus fielded the question about paying taxes and condemns the Teachers of the Law for taking financial advantage of widows in their distress. Why all this attention to the use and misuse of money?

Perhaps it has something to do with what Jesus says in Matthew 6:21 and Luke 12:34, where He says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." There is nothing else in our lives today that so reveals the state of our hearts than what we think about our money and what we do with our money. **One's attitude toward money is a chief indicator of the spiritual state of one's heart.**

It looks like our attitude toward money here at Fourth Street is going to be put to the test this year in a rather significant way. We are presently looking down the barrel of a very expensive project that we didn't count on. The old steam pipes and radiators that date from the 1920's and heat our church are crumbling. Bill Bartley has been looking a lot lately like the little Dutch boy who stuck his finger in

the dike to hold back the ocean. The trouble is that as soon as Bill patches or replaces a pipe or a fitting at one spot, two other leaks pop up somewhere else. He doesn't have enough fingers to plug all the holes. We have already figured out that the cost of repairing what we have is too high to be practical and that the only logical thing to do is to replace our present system with one that will be easier to maintain and more economical to run in the future.

I dread the fact that we will need to ask for money, especially in our present economy. But if we are going to have heat in our building next winter we are going to need to make a major investment in the furnace. At our Council meeting this evening I am going to recommend that we change our Anniversary Project from the paving we had planned to do between the buildings out back, and designate it for the replacement of our heating system. Even so, our resolve to continue God's work here at Fourth Street and our commitment to Christ will be tested. The state of our hearts will be tested by the challenge to give to this project. **Where we invest our treasure reveals the priorities of our hearts. It's all about the heart.**

On our Lenten journey we are challenged to move from focus on *me* to *we* and from a focus on *outside appearances* to *inside holiness*. The third movement I see in our Scripture passage this morning is the movement from focus on *material* things to a focus on the *spiritual*.

Mark 13:1 and 2 say, "As he was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!" "Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

I hate to admit it, but one of the things I've struggled with in recent years is the size of our church. We now live in the era of the Mega Church, and I keep hearing about churches that have not just hundreds but thousands of members. In fact we have a couple of churches inside our own denomination that are now close to having a thousand members. I was talking with a man this past week who was telling me about some of the wonderful programs they have at Saint John's Catholic Church in Lakemont. He also indicated that between their several weekend masses, they see close to a thousand people in worship. Betty Jane and I have relatives that belong to the big new Assembly of God in Roaring Spring. It's easy to find others who have larger and newer facilities and greater resources than we do and to be impressed with them while questioning our own significance. Sometimes I can't help wondering why we are here. Is all the work and

worry and expense of maintaining our little ministry here really worth it? When we pay the price of upgrading our heating system, will it be worth it?

The honest answer to such gloomy questions is: "well, it depends." On the material front it really doesn't matter. The disciples of Jesus found that out when they gushed over the splendor of the buildings in Jerusalem. Jesus told them that all of it would soon be destroyed, not one stone left upon another. A church's physical size or aesthetic beauty, or even the number of its programs, are no guarantees of its spiritual health or significance. Its value cannot be measured materially but must be measured spiritually. Is it helping anyone find the Lord? Are its people growing in Christ and in their service to Him in community? Is it bearing any lasting fruit for the Kingdom?

When I slow down long enough to think about these things, my mood improves greatly. As I look out across our congregation, I see many lives that have been challenged and changed here at Fourth Street. I see families that have been established and preserved. I see mourners who have been comforted. I see gifts that have been put to use for the work of God. I see some people who were lost and lonely who have now found a spiritual home and family here. I see some who were in bondage to the enemy and to his destructive ways, but through the love and ministry and teachings of Jesus that have come to them through this church they have been set free. **Our value in the sight of God is not measured by material things but by His Spirit working among us.**

As we continue our journey with Jesus to the cross, let us seek to become more like Him. As we cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit within and among us, may our focus change from *me* to *we*. May we be less concerned with *outward appearances* and more in tune with *internal integrity*. May we be less concerned about *material things* and more attentive to the *spiritual*.

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Mark 12:38-13:2

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