

Leacock Presbyterian Church, Paradise, PA
Richard E. Sindall, guest minister
Sunday, November 7, 2021
Lessons: Psalm 127:1,2 and Mark 12:38-44

GOD'S WACKY YARDSTICK

We measure things and people. Listen to some measurement questions we ask and the answers we give. “What’s he worth?” Answer: “I hear he’s worth a cool ten million.” “Nah, he’s not worth more than two, maybe three tops.” We use money to measure the worth of a person, implying that the person with less money is worth less or even worthless. It starts as early as preschool. “Keep an eye on that one, he’s college material.” A child is material? Girls are still measured differently, although capability has gained some ground on appearance in measuring their worth. Even so, for both girls and boys, “good looking” scores high, and athleticism gives it a further boost. Throughout life, we are measured and thereby rated and ranked.

God, the Bible assures us in both testaments, has never been impressed by the measurements we take of each other or of ourselves. Max, the floppy-eared little dog in this morning’s puppet parable, had been imprinted in his own mind from early puppyhood as a “worthless mutt,” and even though he came to be adopted, loved, and appreciated, he has a hard time shaking that self-understanding, and so he finds it challenging to accept love without suspicion and to trust it. That challenge is even harder for children who have been rejected or abused. Those who need love most have the greatest difficulty receiving it.

It is from the choice of David the shepherd boy to be the future king of Judah and Israel that we hear the famous contrast that establishes what I’m calling “God’s wacky yardstick.” Samuel the prophet is certain God will select one of the tall, good looking sons of Jesse for Samuel to anoint, but, no, God chooses the least likely because while humans are impressed by outward appearances, God looks upon the heart. Time out for a language check. We use the heart to represent feelings, sentiments, sometimes courage (“She’s small, but she has a lot of heart!”). In the language of Israel, however, the heart locates symbolically the person’s will, motive, purpose, and desire. The evil heart hatches schemes and sets traps. The pure heart learns to see more and more as God sees and so to value what God values and want what God desires for this much-loved creation and its people. It is the wacky yardstick that gives us hope for a redeemed world.

Uh, oh, the famous “widow’s mite” – that tiny, numerically insignificant, downright measly offering the impoverished widow slips into the Temple’s offering basket, perhaps

hoping to go unnoticed and so evade scorn. Surely, no one will be impressed by her two minimal coins, together amounting, we are told, to about a penny.

Might there be sarcasm? “Wow, she just made our budget.” LOL. Years ago I heard a sneering landlord remark sarcastically to some workers about a tenant’s old automobile, “Yeah, you’d better cut off that tree limb too, since he’s so afraid it might fall on his beautiful car.” Actually, the car was worth more than many a Mercedes or BMW because it was the man’s way over the bridge into a neighboring state to work, and so the old jalopy was crucial to his supporting himself and his wife. In the same vein but more in the extreme of the “Third World,” a man reflected, “If I died, my family would grieve, but if our ox died, my family would starve.”

Someone, however, observing the offerings made that day in Temple, is quite impressed by the poor widow’s two small coins and seizes the moment to teach his disciples something of the heart of God. He is the wandering rabbi from provincial Galilee with the ragtag following. His name is Joshua, but we know him by its Greek form, Jesus, and we call him savior, lord, redeemer, and Son of God.

If you have been a Christian long, upon hearing the story of this widow and her offering, you may expect a so-called stewardship sermon to follow. After all, “Tis the season.” And I say the word stewardship without scorn because what it really means is something we, our society, and our world need desperately: the rare understanding that from creation we human beings are commissioned to represent the Creator in the deeply loved but tragically twisted world we inhabit. Further, Jesus Christ has entrusted us with representing him in this world for which he gave himself to shame, torture, and death. “The earth is the LORD’S in all its fulness, the world and all that live in it.” That declaration from a psalm is key to understanding our calling to live as stewards (caretakers), not only of the earth, but of the gospel itself which Jesus has entrusted to us, his church.

So, yes, stewardship is crucial, but fund-raising is not the message of this New Testament story. It is not, “give until it hurts,” though giving from the heart is a very good thing. It is not a “dig deep” challenge, though casual offerings without faith, thanksgiving, or commitment can be insulting to God.

No, the message is gospel – that is, good news which changes everything. Jesus, in both parts of this New Testament reading is breaking our customary yardsticks – our standard ways of measuring people – and replacing them with God’s view of us.

God does not count as we do. The qualities that impress us, sometimes making us jealous or maybe subservient, do not impress Jesus because they do not have worth to the

heart of God. Jesus' announcement of God's coming close to us with promise for a newness of life changes all the measurements. The lengthy and well-phrased prayers of some of the scribes do not please God, especially not when some of those highly religious scribes devour the houses of widows.

The condemnation here is not of Judaism but of self-glorifying religion. We have our Christian versions of the same. Many years ago, a colleague – pastor of a nearby church – told me a terrible story, but not one that would ever make headlines. An elderly widow, confused in mind but kind at heart, had recently died. When her adult children went over her finances, they discovered that she had been cleaned out and left nearly penniless. What they found instead of her assets was a stack of letters, appeals from an evangelical association for emergency contributions along the line of, “We need you to send us two thousand dollars to save us from having to bring home from such and such a country our missionaries, our evangelists. Real stewardship has nothing to do with con artistry. Neither does the end, however pious or zealous, justify the means.

Let's listen for gospel. The coming of Jesus Christ changes everything, and I'm not talking about the worldwide spread of the Christian religion (much of which was accomplished by force of arms) nor about the power and glory of Europe's centuries of Christendom. Neither am I talking about any political power or any triumphalist Christianity here in North America. The reign or kingdom God grows slowly like a seed growing secretly or a lump of leaven working its way through a batch of dough, but there is good news for the poor, the discouraged, the left-out or left-behind, and even the deeply shamed outcast. God is not interested in power or prestige. Jesus did not and does not borrow pride from the highly successful, from the philanthropist who can give millions out what amounts for him to petty cash. Jesus Christ stands with the vulnerable, and, yes, that includes even the well-off who discover their own human vulnerability and their own need for gospel.

Unless the Lord builds up the church, increases in membership mean nothing. Without good news for the poor, the strangers, the grief-stricken, the different people, the discouraged and even depressed, and all the ones who like that widow have little, it seems, to offer – without gospel that changes life – the church has nothing to say to a troubled and bitterly conflicted, self-destructive world. We are, as one theologian has put it, waiting for gospel. Not just comfort, though comfort we need and God offers. Not just heaven someday, though I deeply believe in the resurrection of the body (that is, the person love can recognize and embrace) and in the life everlasting. Not just usefulness, though God has purpose (not just “a” purpose, one and done) but purpose for our lives. We matter because we matter so much to God. Christ calls us to represent and together embody hope for this despairing and terribly unjust world which, without knowing it, is also waiting for gospel. Amen.