

Entering the Sanctuary

- Mark 12:38-44; Hebrews 9:24-28; Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17
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People come to church for a whole variety of reasons. This place, this “sanctuary,” is both public and private space. We gather here and, by gathering, become a visible body. This is a public act, this gathering. It is a witness to who we are and what we believe. We want people to see us here.

I come here alone sometimes; I sit in empty pews and pray. Perhaps you’ve done the same thing. This is your spiritual home, just as it is mine. It is good to come here when you can be alone with God. Whether public or private, God “lives” here. We come here, alone or with company, to encounter God.

There are other prayer spaces in your life. Yes, you can go elsewhere and find God. Here, though, there is something more. The generations have gathered here. These walls have absorbed the prayers of thousands of people. This cross has inspired innumerable souls. There is a “collected” spirit here; there is a natural reverence here. There is something holy here.

Albert Einstein was quoted as saying: “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.”

Is this not the meaning of the widow coming to the sanctuary in Mark’s gospel? She came to the place of God. She came as a widow. We take this description to mean that her husband had died; we honor the death that she still mourns. We know how to do that. We know what it means to live with loss.

But, we aren’t talking about sorrow here; we’re talking about survival. To be declared a widow in biblical days was to be declared permanently impoverished. Unattached women were outside of the economic social safety nets that, in those days, were tied to family, marriage, and children. This was the concern that Naomi had for Ruth, to “seek some security for you...” (Ruth 3:1) Naomi advised Ruth to attach herself to Boaz, so that “it may be well with you.”

Mark, though, only tells us that the woman, the widow, came, bringing with her such a slight offering that, in financial terms, it was meaningless. But, “not everything that counts can be counted.” The woman came to be with God. The woman came to honor God.

Ann Weems, in her book Searching for Shalom, pens a poem inspired by the widow who enters the sanctuary.

Frail and stooped with the ravages of illness,
out of the hospital
her only yearning: to go to church.
Out of the hospital
into the sanctuary.....
Wearing joy upon her wrinkled face,
she is full of light.
Her hand shaking, she places her offering on the plate.
O God, a widow's mite!
This day in this time
lovingly, cheerfully offered to her Lord.....
O God, a widow's mite,

a sign of hope among us.

A sign of hope.

Curiously, unsettlingly, Jesus has just spoken about the “devouring of widow’s houses” by the scribes, and the text in Mark immediately following our story for today, in Chapter 13, is about the destruction of the Temple. The purpose of sanctuary – a place to meet God on God’s terms – is no longer being served.

“Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.”

Mark tells us that Jesus was sitting opposite the treasury when he saw the widow. We tend to think of treasure as money. Certainly, the widow put some money in the plate. Jesus wants us to know that it is a heartfelt and sacrificial offering. The woman was giving thanks, or maybe she was praying for a child, or maybe this was her last gasp and grasp to find meaning in her hard life. Whatever her motive, money was not the prime motivation. God was the prime motivation.

Money is not our only treasure. My observation is that there is a currency that is far more valuable to us, a currency that is increasingly in short supply. That treasure is time. Our trustees have told us to prepare for the fact that the next three years will be very challenging financially. The challenge, of course, is to maintain what we have built when the endowment support to our annual budget decreases. But, the much greater challenge ahead for us is learning how to make the most of the time our members can give to us.

Let me tell you what I know. People do encounter God here, and they want to continue encountering God here. But I am also getting the strong message from many of you that the pace of activity in your work and home lives leaves you with little energy for activity here at church. Moreover, you’re telling me, as your pastor, that you want a religious experience that is decidedly different from the pressure filled days that you live at work and in your homes. Sometimes the pressure to perform here and the multiple demands of the church organization feel too much like the world at large. You want rest and refuge; you want quiet spiced with the inspiration of the spoken word and the beauty of music. You want relationships that are deep and full of trust. You do not want to attend meetings, nor do you want to feel obligated to attend church-wide events. The treasure of your time, and the treasure of your energy, is simply too precious, for you have so little of both.

Yet, you are thankful, and you do want to serve, and you do want your children to have faith, and you do want to break bread with other believers, and you do want the church healthy and transformative. Where two of three are gathered there has to be some form of organization, some level of accountability. What to do?

We have before us a conundrum. Not just a problem to be fixed but a puzzle of a thousand pieces to be put together. The model of church that we have known has to change. In some sense, the Temple does have to be deconstructed and rebuilt. Here’s another Einstein quote: “We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.”

Einstein is right. We have created the problem we now face. Not unlike the scribes and Pharisees, we’ve gotten accustomed to a certain way of being church; church as highly organized and predictable. Preserving that way has become a goal. The messages we’re getting today are telling us that people want to encounter God and grow in faith without the layers of organization and activity that make them more tired and less energetic. You are telling me that you want sanctuary, you want refuge.

His All Holiness Bartholomew I, the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Orthodox Christian World has said this:

“Even though our faith may be 2,000 years old, our thinking is not. True progress is a balance between preserving the essence of a certain way of life and changing things that are not essential. Christianity was born a revolutionary faith, and we have preserved that ...

Paradoxically, we have succeeded in not changing the faith that is itself dedicated to change.”
What is it, friends, which is *essential* here at First Baptist? Money? Sure. We cannot function without your financial support. Involvement? Absolutely. We are nothing if you are not involved in the full life of the church. Commitment? Without a doubt. If you’re a Christian you need to be in church and in relationship with others in the church. Service? Clearly, the Bible’s mandate is to provide quality of life to others, and we are more effective in service when we are serving together. Spiritual growth? Affirmative. Growth in self and faith is the primary product of this church, and any church. Hope? Bingo! Hope! Of this list of essentials, hope leads the list. Every other essential of faith flows from hope, including our worship, our collective encounter with God. Hope is the message from Mark. The Temple might fall, but here is a widow with hope. She carries the faith forward.

Where did the widow get it, this hope? From an encounter with God in the sanctuary.

O God, a widow's mite,
a sign of hope among us.
A sign of hope.

First Baptist, we have some deep discernment to accomplish. How can we become a refuge from the pressures of the world and a place of powerful encounter with God and, at the same time, with joy, hope, and energy, carry out labor intensive programs of education, service, and fellowship that have always been a part of church organization?

Remember. “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.” Mark and Einstein are leading us a conclusion. There won’t be a single, democratic, majority-rules decision about what is essential. There will be 300 decisions about how to use our encounters with God and the limited time in our treasury in order to grow in faith, hope, and love.

I invite you to join me in taking a cue from the poor widow. She simply entered the sanctuary, open to God. God did the rest. What counts is being open to God in the sanctuary.

Amen.