

The Ultimate Gift

Mark 12:38-44; Hebrews 9:24-28

November 11, 2012 (Veterans Day Sunday)

The Reverend Damaris D. Whittaker

This morning is a great morning. We had a baptism! We welcomed a new life into the life of the church: *Welcome, Jesse.*

Also, we are honoring the veterans among us. How grateful we are for the service of those who go out in the world and sacrifice their own wellbeing for the freedom of this country.

Throughout the Liturgy this morning, we shared a poem by Alden Solovy, here is an excerpt:

“These things I do not know: The sound of a bullet. The power of a blast. The blood of a comrade. The depth of your wound. The terror at midnight. The dream at dawn. Your fear or your pain.” We hear about these experiences, we may have some understanding, but if we have not been there—we don’t really know it.”

We have been so blessed not to live in a country where there are not physical battlefields. We can live a life of freedom and virtual peace here on American soil. We are not afraid of walking into a minefield. When we go to bed at night, we do not fear.

Therefore, we perhaps do not fully appreciate the great sacrifices of our service men and women.

According to the *Huffington Post*:

- More than 1,500 Americans have lost a leg or arm in combat in Iraq or Afghanistan, and hundreds have suffered the amputation of multiple limbs.
- **The number of American battle wounded has passed 50,000**, a grim milestone of more than a decade of war and a reminder of the war's enduring human cost.

- Since 2001, when the war in Afghanistan was launched in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, 5,225 American military personnel have been killed in action in Afghanistan or Iraq.
- More than 16,000 Americans have been taken from the battlefield with severe, disabling wounds.
- Because so many of the wounded are in their early 20s, they and their families face a lifetime during which the medical care required may be costly, intense, and constant.
- The new casualty data, released by the U.S. Army Surgeon General's Office show overall, 253,330 servicemen and women have suffered traumatic brain injury on the battlefield or elsewhere.
- In the Army alone, 73,674 soldiers have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of their combat experience.
- The Army also has diagnosed 30,480 soldiers who returned from combat with traumatic brain injury, often caused by one or more severe blows to the head or exposure to a concussive blast.
- The financial cost of caring for the wounded is dwarfed by the emotional cost, of course. But in 2008, Harvard economist Linda Bilmes has estimated the lifetime cost of caring for the war wounded \$600 billion and \$900 billion. Since then, the data she has gathered indicate that the cost will rise.

What a sacrifice—more than we can imagine!

In the gospel lesson this morning, we learned about a woman who came to the temple and gave all she had. She contributes two copper coins to the temple treasury, "her whole livelihood" according to the Greek, and Jesus judges her contribution as greater than the large sums contributed by the rich.

She certainly exemplifies sacrificial giving, but this widow, as perhaps our veterans, service men and women, is as much of a victim as she is a hero.

In the gospel lesson, this poor widow's story does not stand alone. Instead, it follows Jesus' condemnation of the scribes who run the very temple. "Watch out for the scribes," Jesus says. They're all about themselves and their status. But Jesus goes on: "They devour widows' houses." Having said this, Jesus immediately calls attention to one of those widows who have nothing left. The two stories belong together. How many policies we have made as a country, as a people, without taking into consideration the most vulnerable among us?

You see, as a society, we have great difficulty using words such as the word "poor," acknowledging poverty and despair. I was in a meeting this week and I happened to mention the word "poor" and someone said to me, "Pastor, around here we say 'persons in need.'" We have become so uncomfortable around that word. But the reality is that some of us are one layoff, one medical crisis, one accident away from joining the ranks of the poor. If we were to lose our job, many of us will find it impossible to pay for our mortgage or housing. Poverty hangs around for all of us, and the truth is that half of Americans will face poverty before we turn 65.¹

So, the widow's generosity places the reality of poverty before our eyes. It reminds us that the poor do not represent abusers who drain our resources. Her story certainly brings to the forefront this Sunday that after our veterans go out to war to give their lives for this country, they often find themselves in the ranks of the poor when they come home.

If you have never served in our Community Breakfast on Saturday mornings, today I encourage you to consider doing so. I have volunteered for the Community breakfasts here at Center Church on several occasions, and have learned that many of our neighbors who come to eat with us are people who have served our military, have had good jobs, and have been in a much better financial position. Whether we recognize it or not, we have lots to learn from the poor and the vulnerable.

Finally, we might ask ourselves a simple question: Does Jesus seem like the kind of teacher who wants poor people, especially vulnerable widows, to give away their best resources? Do we imagine Jesus celebrating when the widow's generosity deprived her of "her whole livelihood?" I do not think so.

¹ *Huffington Post*, Greg Carry

However, the story of the widow reminds us that perhaps things have not changed much since the times of Jesus. We live in an economy that often siphons its resources upward and leaves the vulnerable to suffer and face destitution.

The widow gives all of her *livelihood*, not because it was demanded of her, not because it was Jesus' commandment, but her own willingness to give everything to God.

God does not make such demands from us. God is not asking that we give our livelihood. But would we surrender ourselves, our lives? Would we give with gladness and in gratitude? Would we give to honor the most vulnerable among us?

Perhaps if we do, seventeen years from now, when Jesse Sipes turns 18, we will have no wars to speak of.

May the God of justice allow us to come to a place of acknowledgement that it is in giving that we receive. Amen.