Invitation to the Table

Perhaps in this time when we all are acutely aware of what divides God's children; when some mourn and others rejoice over the same experience, and still others are just afraid, one way to show our love for God is by coming to this table to remember all God gives us in Jesus—the way God shows us how much God loves all of us.

One way to show our love for others is by remembering that everyone is welcome at this table. Jesus shared the table with Judas. God has called us all and any who wish to come can do so.

At this table, may we remember the God who showed us what love is, and may we commit ourselves again to bringing that love into the world to all those around us.

Our Communion Hymn is "Draw Us in the Spirit's Tether," #392.

Pastoral Prayer

Today's pastoral prayer is adapted from poetic prayers of Laura Jean Truman and Bishop Steven Charleston. Both writers share from hearts that know humiliation and fear and marginalization: she as a queer writer, preacher, and chaplain; he as a Citizen of the Choctaw Nation and a Native American Elder. If you're interested in the way I have adapted their poetry, I can provide a printed or digital copy. Let us pray:

God of unity and reconciliation and peace and love, we are a broken people—some of us all the time, and all of us some of the time, live in ways that are opposite of your image and likeness, created within us. We are divisive, belligerent, intolerant, and arrogant in our insistence that our ways are your ways; that our thoughts are your thoughts.

For those among us who mourn—who are ashamed, or embarrassed, or afraid:

"Keep our anger
from becoming meanness.
Keep our sorrow
from collapsing into self-pity.
Keep our hearts
soft enough to keep breaking.
Keep our anger
turned towards justice,
not cruelty.

Remind us that all of this,
every bit of it,
is for love.

Keep us fiercely kind." *(Laura Jean Truman's poem, with plural pronouns)*

For those among us who celebrate—who anticipate Greatness and personal validation:

Keep our revelry
from becoming meanness.
Keep our rejoicing
from collapsing into self-righteousness.
Keep our hearts
soft enough to experience empathy.
Keep our energy
turned towards justice,
not cruelty.

Remind us that all of this,
every bit of it,
is for love.

Keep us fiercely kind. *(My adaptation of Laura Jean Truman's poem)*

For all of us, when see others who disagree with us as wrong, or stupid, or even as evil:

When they hate, strengthen us to love.
When they curse, strengthen us to bless.
When they hurt, soften us to heal.

We are servants of the light.
We are not afraid of darkness.

We will carry on with our work
as stewards of this Earth
and of all her children.

When they divide, strengthen us to unite.
When they rage, strengthen us to calm.
When they deny, strengthen us to affirm.

We will simply be who we are: for that is
what your Spirit created us to be. *(Bishop Charleston's poem with plural pronouns)*

Amen.

"You'll Never Walk Alone" ~ Susan

Falling Through the Cracks

MARK 12:38-44 (NRSVUE) *As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces* [39]*and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!* [40]*They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."* [41]*He sat down opposite the treasury and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums.* [42]*A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.* [43]*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.* [44]*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."*

The Word of God for the people of God!

Two stories—maybe true, maybe not—in a scientific experiment, some monkeys were placed in a cage. There was a ladder in the middle of the cage with a banana hanging over it. Whenever one of the monkeys went for the banana, the researchers would spray the other monkeys with cold water.

It didn't take long before the monkeys started attacking the one going for the banana so they wouldn't get sprayed.

At that point, researchers removed one monkey and replaced it with a new monkey. The new monkey immediately went for the banana and get attacked.

One at a time, all the monkeys were replaced with new monkeys who'd never been sprayed, yet, they'd still attack any monkey who went for the banana. Why?

Second story—maybe true, maybe not—a new bride's first meal was a ham. Before putting it in the oven, she cut off the hock end and turned it up beside the shank. Her husband asked, "Why did you do that?" She replied, "My mom always did that, and she made the best hams. I guess it releases more flavor or something."

Well, the meal was delicious, but his curiosity was stirred, so he called his mother-in-law and asked, "Why do you cut off the hock end of the ham and turn it up beside the shank?" She replied, "The pan I use is too short for the whole ham."

How much of our lives are spent doing things for no other reason than "We've always done it that way?" How much of our life as a church is spent doing things out of habit: continuing to do things even after they cease to be effective; maybe even forgetting—if we ever knew—why we did them in the first place?

Today's text is an example of what happens when a faith community forgets why it does what it does. The "Widow's Mite" is usually fodder for Stewardship sermons: budget, finance... Rich people put in a portion of their wealth, but she gave it all. You've heard those sermons? Did you ever wonder, if she put in all she had, how did she eat? Did she have kids? What those sermons tend to overlook are the responses of the other people in the story—or their non-response.

It's interesting what we notice and what we fail to notice. Our vision is selective. It has to be. Our brains are on constant overload! Parts of mine shorted out years ago! And I'm reminded regularly of things I overlook—things that fall through the cracks. We simply can't take it all in.

It's interesting what the disciples notice in this story. They've just come into Jerusalem; they've been out on the road and their heads are spinning from the stuff Jesus has been telling them. They'd thought he was the Messiah—the Son of David who'd overthrow Rome and restore the kingdom of Israel, but he was saying stuff like, Son of Man, and killed by the Chief Priests and Scribes...

But now they're in Jerusalem, the capital city, the symbol of everything Israel means—or once meant. Wow! There's the temple—one of the wonders of the ancient world—Herod's temple. You remember Herod? Corrupt politician. In bed with the Romans. Chasing Jesus' people around, throwing them in prison... But history remembers him as a great builder, and here was Herod's temple. They noticed.

"Teacher, just look at these huge stones!" And Jesus says, "Not one stone will be left standing on another." And the disciples are scratching their heads.

Then they go inside where all the important looking people are. 12 country bumpkins from out in Galilee, now in the big city. "Master, look at all those Scribes! They've spent their whole lives studying he Bible! Look at their long robes, and how the people swarm around them." And Jesus says, "Beware of these scribes who like to walk around in long robes and soak up public attention."

I remember my first trip to Hollywood... Just back from Vietnam... Jo Lynn & Craig had flown out to meet me... he was 18 months old. We went to Disneyland, then Hollywood, and there we were on Hollywood Blvd: Grumman's Chinese Theater, the Walk of Fame with its brass stars imbedded in the sidewalk... Frank Sinatra. Elizabeth Taylor. Wide-eyed, gawking bumpkins from Oklahoma, rubbernecking to see if maybe we could catch a glimpse of somebody famous.

Jesus said, "Did you see that?" The disciples said, "Huh?"

Nobody noticed the widow.

It's interesting what we notice and what we fail to notice—and *who* we fail to notice. Interesting; but significant. It is those who slip through the cracks that define our purpose for existence as a church—the "out-of-sight-out-of-mind" people and causes we don't see here inside this facility on Sunday morning.

In the story from Mark's Gospel, as the disciples "***watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums.***" They were gawking at the big givers: important people—deep pockets—people non-profits depend on. They were doing the Lord's work, supporting the temple. It's a good thing.

But Jesus noticed the widow. He wasn't critical of the big givers, but for some reason he wasn't impressed. I don't know; maybe some of them gave it for show: there were no banks; they couldn't write checks or give through PayPal. It was all out there in plain sight. Maybe they got a plaque on the wall, or at least a letter of acknowledgement from the Temple Secretary.

Or maybe they gave to get their ticket to heaven punched. "I did my duty." In the 7th chapter of Mark Jesus notes a hypocritical practice of the Pharisees, who set aside money for their tithe but then refuse to help even their own parents who are hungry—money I might use to feed the hungry is already committed to the church. Matthew's Gospel puts it this way: ***"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith."*** (MATTHEW 23:23)

But in today's story, Jesus doesn't question the motives of those who put great amounts into the treasury. He just noticed her.

Preacher had a great sermon today! That's good; but did you notice the secretary who calls the sick and reports on the church Facebook group more often than the preacher does?

Our church does a great service through its Precious Pantry ministry! That's good; but do you know who goes into the kitchen each week and fills a couple of Walmart bags and goes to fill that pantry? Do you know who regularly monitors the Pantry supplies and keeps the shelves stocked and organized?

The candles on our Communion Table are beautiful reminders of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our worship! That's good; but do you know who keeps them filled with oil so they're always ready for the acolytes to light?

These things don't just happen. Do you know who keeps the flowers and shrubs around the church sign and on either side of the door you enter every Sunday? Do you know who keeps them watered during the summer? Do you know who locks up after church? Turns out all the lights? Sets the thermostats?

We couldn't operate without the regular contributions of our members into our treasury. There's no showmanship involved; we don't pass by and throw in large amounts—we do checks and PayPal, but our ministries are well supported financially. What falls through the cracks are those things that not many people notice, but without which not much would happen.

Some time this afternoon, take some time and mentally review what you see happening here, week after week. Next Sunday, look around and notice some of the things you may not have noticed before. Who does that? Make an effort to find out. Thanksgiving is in 18 days. It's a good time of year to catch the things that usually fall through the cracks, and the people who do them, and say, "Thank you."