

# **A Life that Matters**

We end this liturgical year with a short series from the gospels. We've covered a lot of ground in this Year B and 2020-21. And rightly so; it has been a tumultuous time. Even here, as Year B comes to an end and the calendar year is almost done as well, we still feel that unsettledness of a world reeling and everything changing. Our call has been to get back to normal, though we knew normal is not our true goal. At least the normal of the way the world had been. There is too much that we needed to leave behind, too much that we needed to overcome – and still do. It has always been the mission of the church to bring transformation, so being unsettled shouldn't be odd to us.

But it was odd, and it is odd. We get in our routines and our habits just like everyone else. Maybe it has been good for us to be so shaken. Maybe it has been useful for us to reexamine our practices and our patterns in order to move into the new world that is coming into being around us. Maybe the church that has been isn't the church that is needed today. And our task is to discern that new community and new disciples and how we live into that new promise and new hope.

So, what would this new understanding of the life of discipleship look like? What are some of the markers that help us grow into a life that matters, as individuals and as a community of faith and transformation? This series is designed to give some answers to these questions. It is not, however, supposed to be exhaustive; there are a lot of other markers that might be included in such a list. But, guided by the lectionary-assigned gospel texts for these three Sundays in November 2021, we discover three elements out of many that go to make up "A Life that Matters."

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – Everything She Had  
November 7, 2021 – [Mark 12:38-44](#)

## INTRODUCTION

The first attribute of a life that matters that we will examine is generosity. Maybe this is an opportunity to refresh our call to stewardship. Stewardship isn't something that should be heard only once a year and then when we are asking for a commitment to give. Generosity, as reflected in our gospel text this week, is about how we hold the stuff of this life lightly, even as we hold people and Christ tightly.

A well-known hymn that captures this idea of generosity is "Take My Life, and Let It Be," 399 in *The United Methodist Hymnal*. The middle verse often catches us singing with our fingers crossed: "Take my silver and my gold; not a mite would I withhold." In this text of the widow's mite, we need to grasp something of the high calling this life of generosity really is.

Perhaps it is time for a call to commitment, an opportunity for the whole congregation, corporately and individually, to declare their intention to give their all for the cause of Christ. Our prayers invite us to reflect on the balance between our commitment to things and our commitment to others through acts of service and responses of love.

Can we provide space for a reorienting as we worship together? Can we encourage a re-examination of priorities, or goals, or desires, as we seek to emulate this widow who was willing to give everything to God? The question behind a life that matters is, "What really matters to us?" Perhaps a bookmark or pocket card with this question would be a way of extending the worship experience beyond the benediction.

## PREACHING NOTES

You've preached this text before – usually as a part of your stewardship campaign. It's a great text for that, don't you think? An inherent invitation to give more than you can afford. Wait, what? Is that really a message we want to proclaim? Sure, we've heard those stories of unscrupulous TV "evangelists" bankrupting poor widows and others who tune in hoping for some sort of connection. We're pretty clear that isn't the kind of ministry we ought to be supporting.

But then, a chapter back, Jesus is casting folks out of the very temple this widow is supporting with her pittance. The beginning of this week's gospel text isn't all that supportive of the religious status quo. Perhaps, on second thought, this isn't the best stewardship sermon after all.

So, what is it? Is it a diatribe against the institution that is crumbling around us as we speak? The one that preys on widows such as the one in this text, or at best neglects them in favor of buildings and systems and structures? Do we claim Jesus' righteous anger and denounce the institution, biting the hand that feeds us?

There are those who would take that route. And perhaps there are places where such a word needs to be proclaimed. But is that place your pulpit at this time? And in fact, read the text again and look for that burning anger in Jesus as he makes his declaration. Maybe it burned out during his long and no doubt tiring wrestling match with the scribes earlier in chapter 12. Maybe now he's just weary of all the strife and instead wants to say something kind about someone, so he finds this poor woman and wants to bless her somehow.

Except that there seems to be something more profound going on here, or at least there is from Mark's point of view. Maybe it didn't happen exactly like this; maybe Jesus didn't go from warning about the scribal way of life to plopping himself down next to the offering plates to see who was giving what. Maybe Mark selected these two events and put them there side by side for a reason. Maybe he wanted us to consider what a life that mattered really means.

On the one hand, we have "beware the scribes . . . devouring the widows' houses," and on the other, we have "she has put in everything she had, all she

had to live on.” There is something of a contrast here, some redefining of the kind of life we are called to live. One group lived for self, wanting and hoarding, grabbing hold of everything they could get their hands on, regardless of the collateral damage such taking caused. The other gave away, lived for others and not self, regardless of damage to the self that would be caused by this level of generosity.

While we cannot recommend behavior that is self-destructive, we could also recognize that the widow trusted in the care that was being offered by the very institution she was giving her whole living to. Perhaps it was gratitude for what she had received that caused her to give so prodigally. The widow’s action was a sign of faith in the community. She didn’t worry about herself in the context of a caring system that knew how to look after those in need. She trusted in the temple and the people who administered its grace.

Some of us would call this naïve. Perhaps, given the statements he made last chapter and previously in this one, even Jesus might wonder if her trust is misplaced. Yet, he presents her as having a more effective witness than all the others who came to make offerings that day.

There is a background to this moment, of which you might be aware. These offering boxes were not hidden away and brought out in the act of worship to be passed discretely around the assembled worshipers. No, these sat out in the public courts as a way for all to have access to giving, even if they were not worthy of entering into the inner courts. Nor were they simple plates with padded insides to mute the sound of coins landing on the metal. Nor were they boxes with narrow slits where you could slide your envelope into the darkness inside. These were large metal trumpet-like receptacles into which you could pour your temple money, causing a clinking and a clanking that would ring across the open court, drawing attention to any who were in the area. No doubt some would aim their largess in such a way as to make the loudest sound possible, hoping to wow the bystanders with their wealth and supposed generosity.

Yet, Jesus ignores the noisemakers and draws attention to the faint plink of tiny copper coins dropping into the box. And he says “this poor widow has put in more” than all the clinkers and clankers in the courtyard. Now you know that Matthew would have whipped out his calculator at that point and shown Jesus

the math here. I mean, even at a rough estimate, which we former tax collectors are loath to do, she contributed something on the scale of .00002 percent of what some of those guys dumped in. Come on, Jesus. You could say she was a higher risk, disposing of assets that she could ill-afford to part with, but you can't say she put in more than they did. Can you?

Jesus looked him in the eye and said, she put in more than all of them combined. More, Matthew, more. Because they put what they weren't going to use anyway; they put in their excess, their leftovers, the interest on the interest. Whereas she put in her whole life.

I know our translation says, "her whole living"; and that is an appropriate translation for the word used here. But it is "*bios*" (ὅλον τὸν βίον αὐτῆς (Mk. 12:44 GNT), or "*holon ton bion autos*" – the whole of her life) that elsewhere means life. We get the word "biology" from it, the study of life. She put in her whole life.

There is something here about the life we are called to live as followers of Jesus, as disciples. And that is that we are to hold our own life lightly. Yes, our stuff too, our livelihood as well. We are to hold all our stuff lightly. But even our own lives. They aren't our possessions to hoard, but to give away, to give as a blessing, to give as an act of gratitude, to give in service. We are called, invited, set free from the bondage to our stuff and ourselves, to live free and unencumbered by our own lives and able to embrace the constant hope of eternity.

Matthew's eyes were spinning too when he heard this. He grabbed a kid running through the courtyard and handed off his calculator. The kid gave him a puzzled look as he beheld this treasure. Matthew shrugged and said, "I'm living by a different scale now, a different kind of math." The kid ran off and gathered with his friends as they admired the new toy, and the kid told them all about the crazy guy he met in the temple court today.

Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – Not One Stone

November 14, 2021 – [Mark 13:1-8](#)

## INTRODUCTION

Taking the long view. Foresight? Perspective? It's hard to find a word that can sum up the attribute Mark 13:1-8 invites us to consider. In the story, the disciples are wowed by the seeming permanence and strength of the temple building. But Jesus says it won't last. He is asking us to look beyond the moment toward a future realization of the kin-dom that is coming. Note that he isn't asking us to ignore the moment, to be blind to the realities of the world as it is right now. But he is asking us to not put all our hope in what we see and to work for what is coming but is not yet here.

This is an opportunity here almost at the end of the Christian year (since it all starts with Advent) for us to remind ourselves that we are people looking forward to a promise. It need not be a longing for heaven, but more a hoping for the kin-dom to come on earth as it is in heaven, just like we pray each week. Part of our worship experience week after week is to open ourselves up to the vision God has for all of creation, which includes us!

We should pray for the ability to see beyond the temporary troubles of this world and discover how to begin building a foundation that leads to eternity. What do we emphasize? Where do we put our hopes? How does my brokenness not define me and allow me to see a wholeness I can't yet feel? We pray for healing every time we gather – for ourselves and for others. And God wills healing in every case; we grasp that truth wholeheartedly. But we won't always see that healing happen in the way we think would be best. Yet we pray with hope and with confidence.

We offer up this world in all its current messiness, knowing that there is a better way to be in community. And we invite the Spirit to work that better way into the community that we are becoming, the disciples that we are being made into, so that we become the light on the hill for the rest of the world. We tear down the barriers of division, the fences of hate, and we live hospitality with our whole being. We learn to look beyond to see and claim a life that matters.

## PREACHING NOTES

Mark loves the twelve; you can just tell. He makes them look goofy at the drop of a hat; you ever notice that? Like we treat those closest to us, family, loved ones. Here they are wandering around the big city like rubes from the hill country, staring up, mouths agape. “Dang,” they say, “look at those buildings.” “Oh, cool,” they gasp, “amazing.” It was quite a sight, that temple. It was huge, larger than anything most had ever seen. And it looked like it would withstand an attack from a Sherman tank, if they had a clue what a Sherman tank was. They just seemed in awe of what they were seeing and what the building represented.

You can imagine their disappointment when Jesus didn’t share their enthusiasm for stone and mortar, for architecture and design, for state and religious symbolism. He just seemed to brush it all away with a word. “Do you see these buildings?” Well, of course, that is what they were looking at; that was what caught their attention in the first place. They were stunned, amazed, swept away. “These buildings?” Jesus seems to sneer, or at least dismiss. “They’ll be gone before you know it. Dust. Crumbles. Rubble.”

And he continued to stride out of the temple ground heading to the Mount of Olives. The puzzled disciples stumbled along after him, wondering what that was all about. After exchanging glances and head bobs and other silent communication, the brother sets approached Jesus as he sat on a stone in the garden. “Um,” they started, probably Peter, since he tended to speak first and think later, “Hey, Jesus, is there something we need to know? I mean, a date we need to put on our Google calendars or something?”

As is usual with Jesus, he doesn’t really answer the question they asked. Instead, he answers the question they should have asked. They asked him, “when.” That’s our common question. “When? When will this happen? When will I need to be in the right place, in right relationship, right with God? When?” That’s just not a question that Jesus takes up. Probably because the true answer is, “Now!” Why wait? Why put it off until the last minute and miss out on all the joy there is in living rightly now? Why wait until you have to instead of doing now when you get to?

And what is it that they should be doing? Paying attention. That's the usual answer to the usual question. Pay attention—to what is going on around you and what is coming down the road—not in fear, but in faith.

What are we supposed to do with these apocalyptic texts? Are we supposed to stoke the fear, or issue warnings and threats? That's how many see these words. But Jesus seems to be asking for something different from that. We know that he never has much time for fear as a tool or as a handicap. He is always chastising the fearful, even while he is gentle with the doubters. So, I don't think he would have much time for those who play on fear as a method for getting people into the faith.

Instead, while at times he seems to be saying "live in the moment," here, he argues that we need to take the long view. Look beyond the current situation, for good or for ill. This isn't all that there is. This, whatever this might be for you right now, doesn't define who you are and who you will be. There is more to come, a world you can barely imagine and can only glimpse from afar right now.

So, Jesus tells the four and through them the twelve and through them all of us, watch out whom you follow. Watch out whom you hitch your hopes to. There are some who might seem to have all the answers, those who offer you a better tomorrow than the today you find yourself in. There are many who will gladly take on all followers. There are those who will accept the mantle of leadership who are only in it for themselves. Beware, be aware. Watch who you follow.

Then, when stuff happens—and that's the best way to translate most of verse 8, stuff happens—but that's only the beginning. It might seem like the end. It might seem like the collapse of civilization as we know it. It might seem like the overthrow of all that is right and good. "But," says Jesus, "we're just getting started."

Disciples take the long view; they don't get caught in the moment. Yes, we can and need to appreciate every moment of grace and every act of love and service as they come. But we can't lose the greater vision, the kin-dom that is coming. We are following the longer arc of the universe that bends toward justice, even though it doesn't seem to be doing so any time soon.

Jesus doesn't present this to his disciples to scare them, but to help them keep things in proper perspective. And we are called to do the same thing too. We don't get wrapped up in the stones that we have built or that others have torn down. The life that matters is a life that takes the long view and holds on to hope that indeed God has the whole world in God's hands.

Reign of Christ (26<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost) – Everyone Who Belongs  
November 21, 2021 – [John 18:33-37](#)

## **INTRODUCTION**

Reign of Christ Sunday is a marker for the end of the liturgical year. It is a way of saying we wrap up a year's worth of worship by claiming again whose we are. We reiterate our mission – to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The emphasis this week is in the middle – “of Jesus Christ.” That is the kind of disciple that we are. We aren't disciples of our own wisdom; we aren't disciples following the winds of this world. We are disciples of Jesus Christ.

What the John text tells us is that Jesus is a leader like no other. The rules by which other leaders lead don't apply to Jesus. To follow Jesus is to learn to be like him. And in this story, it means being willing to embrace a complicated truth over a comfortable lie.

Our worship this day should be about the elevation of Jesus the Christ. There should be praises sung; there should be allegiance declared; there should be confession about divided loyalty admitted. But even in the face of confession of sin, there is above it all a joy that is almost indescribable. We are who we are because of the one we call the Son of God. We are made into a loving and serving community because of the Christ who loved and served the world. We are told the truth about who we are because he is the truth made flesh before us. Let this day, this time of worship, be a true celebration of hope and of joy and the recognition that we can live a life that matters.

## **PREACHING NOTES**

We've jumped from Mark's Gospel over to John's Gospel for this week. John seems to get the high holy days. You can't help but wonder why they didn't do a four-year cycle for the lectionary, so that John could have his own year. But instead, we get sprinkles of John here and there throughout all three years. Maybe that's a good thing, giving us these shifts of emphasis and characterization from one gospel presentation of Jesus to another. It helps us round out the picture of Jesus in significant ways. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus strains to accomplish mighty acts of healing and exorcism. In John, Jesus is more fluid and almost

ethereal, certainly more philosophical, and he seeks to describe himself to the incredulous disciples.

This text, however, isn't a convoluted philosophical debate with hopelessly outclassed scribes and Pharisees, nor is it yet another attempt by Jesus to define himself to his followers in terms that revealed more than they were able to comprehend. No, this is a surprisingly profound conversation between a prisoner in chains and his jailer holding all the keys, and yet you can't help but wonder where the power resides.

The prisoner has not yet been flogged nearly to death; he's not yet been dragged out on display to a bloodthirsty crowd and heard the words, "behold your king!" sneered in full sarcastic voice. He's not yet been dismissed as an irritant that the Roman occupiers could no longer ignore. Yes, he was smacked around by a jumpy temple guard who heard what he thought was sass toward his boss, the high priest. But that swollen lip and bit of dried blood under his darkened nose was nothing compared to what was coming.

You would be excused in thinking that this was a conversation between rival authorities, jockeying for their place on the stage. The prisoner had been left cooling his heels in the governor's mansion while Pilate went out to play chess with the temple authorities. Here's where the jockeying took place, the political one-upmanship, or exchange of favors and who owed who what after this. You can't help but feel like no one came out on top on this one.

Nonetheless, Pilate sweeps back into his offices and eyes the source of all their woes for a moment. Then he shakes his head and with a sly grin says, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He waves his hand in Jesus' general direction as if to say, "I see nothing kingly in this sorry excuse for a holy man."

Then Jesus takes control of the conversation, as he has done throughout the Gospel of John. Those who thought they had him were left floundering; those who wanted him to leave them alone were surprised at the depth of his caring; those who thought flattery would get them everywhere were challenged to think differently; and even those who gave up everything to follow him were left open-mouthed at a glimpse of a reality they had no idea even existed.

Roles were swapped before all the participants knew what was happening, and Jesus the prisoner because the judge, and Pilate the key holder knew there was nothing he could unlock in this mess of a moment. "I'm not a Jew," Pilate protested, throwing up his hands and backing away as if that could keep him safe.

"My kingdom is not of this world." What did he mean by that? Is our faith, in the end, about getting out of the world as unscathed as we possibly can? Is it about some spiritual reality that has nothing to do with the flesh and blood and bone of the existence that defines us now? Are we simply passing through, waiting for something somewhere else? Because it kind of sounds that way. Any many of his followers throughout the centuries have placed their bets on that truth.

But what if he wasn't trying to spiritualize faith in that moment? What if, instead, he was trying to describe a new way of living in this world? What if he was setting aside centuries of power politics wielded at the end of a sharp stick? "If my kingdom were of this world," he goes on to describe, "you'd have a war on your hands, an insurrection designed to get what we think we deserve. But that's not how we make our way in the world. The revolution I'm leading is like nothing you have ever seen; the kin-dom I'm proclaiming, the kin-dom I'm leading reworks human relationship at its most fundamental level. It's a whole new world."

All of which flew over Pilate's head like a low flying military drone. But he grasps at the only straw that makes sense to him in that confusing conversation, "so you are a king?" Kin-dom, kingdom, who can tell the difference? Maybe there is insurrection here, maybe there is something worthy of destroying this vision of how the world could be, should be, maybe was created to be.

"You say I am a king." Again, with the Zen-like remarks. Who knows what this means? I'm sure Pilate had no idea. You say I am a king, because you think in kings, you think in power, you think in conflict and authority and rule.

This is "Reign of Christ" Sunday. It used to be called "Christ the King" Sunday. But maybe we've been listening to this conversation long enough to recognize that we're being challenged on the whole "king" idea. Don't misunderstand. It isn't that we no longer want to claim that Christ is our guide, our example, our savior and friend, that all true authority rests in him. It's just that history tells us that a king rules by fear, by threat, by military might, and that maybe we've been doing a disservice to the one who came to live among us and be God with us by calling

him king. In this conversation, Jesus seems to want to avoid the nomenclature. So, what is left? Where do we go from here? We follow Jesus.

“You want to talk about kingdoms, I want to talk about truth.” That’s where Jesus went with this king idea. “I have come to bear witness to the truth.” The truth about living, the truth about faith, the truth about meaning and purpose. The truth about grace and reconciliation. This is the truth that Christ came to testify to. And everyone, hear this, “everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

A life that matters is a life that belongs to the truth. A life of truth-telling and truth-living. We cannot be sustained by a lie. We cannot be redeemed by a lie, even a beautiful lie, even a longed-for lie. To claim the reign of Christ is to put an end to untruth, which is harder than we want to admit. Pilate’s reply to all of this is conveniently left out of the lectionary text for this week. He shambles off and mutters, “What is truth?” Then he goes and says he finds no case against Jesus but has him killed anyway. He claims to not be acquainted with truth so that he can perpetuate a lie.

Today is a day for declaring our intention to live a life that matters, a life of radical generosity that holds all our possessions and our very lives lightly. It is a life of taking the long view, and while living fully in each moment, not letting this moment define all of existence or to shape our hope. And now a life of belonging to the truth, a truth that transcends individual limited perspective and allows the community to hear the voice of Christ as the guide and hope for living a life that matters.