

“Going All In”

Sermon: Year B, Pentecost 25, Proper 27, Lectionary 32

Texts: Mark 12:38–44, 1 Kings 17:8–16

Preached: November 11, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace and peace to you from the God who goes “all in.” AMEN

This weekend we observe Veterans Day, stopping to remember and to honor those who have given of themselves in service to their country, expressing our gratitude for the sacrifices they made, especially for those who made the ultimate sacrifice. Awhile back, I read Stephen Ambrose’s book, *Citizen Soldiers*, an account of World War II in Europe. It’s hard to imagine what the men and women who served there went through: long separation from home and family and friends, huddling in snow-covered foxholes, slogging through deep mud, long nights of watchfulness, long periods of uneasy boredom followed by sudden unannounced ambush and frantic activity, sharp hunger when supplies were slow in arriving, painful injuries and debilitating illness, seeing comrades dying before their eyes...it’s a horrible thing to contemplate, in so many ways.

You could ask yourself why anyone would be willing to do that. To be sure, I’ve known veterans who would smile wryly and say, “Well, at first it was because I was drafted.” But there was more to it than that, something much larger than that. There was a sense that they were fighting *for* something, that they were contributing to a just cause that called for their service, for their sacrifice. Throughout the stories I’ve read and heard, it becomes clear that there was a sense of relationship that motivated that service and sacrifice: relationship to family and friends, relationship to the larger community and the country, relationship to comrades, relationship with those who were being oppressed. Many were sustained through that sacrifice by their relationship with God, as well. There was a feeling that they were in the effort together, not solely as individuals, but as people who belonged to something larger than themselves. Stephen Ambrose describes a “‘We’ generation,” in the sense that ‘We are all in this together.’ Relationship led to generous, selfless service, relationship led to sacrifice. It was because of a sense of relationship that people were willing to go ‘all in.’”

As I have shared you with on several occasions recently, it’s disturbing to me the degree to which we’ve lost that sense of “we,” that notion that I as an individual belong to something larger than myself, that I have an obligation to my neighbor, that I am called to serve others, that I am bound together with others for a larger cause for the good not only of myself but also of the world. It’s an all-too-human tendency, isn’t it? I keep hammering away at this because I think it’s a worldview that has insidiously permeated our culture, a way of life that is poisoning us. As a culture, we praise the “self-made” individual, we shrink from the notion of sacrifice, we have bought into the idea that “it’s every person for himself or herself,” we isolate ourselves from community and often choose not to participate in joint activities. As a culture, we have turned inward, no longer thinking of ourselves as part of a “we,” but rather thinking of ourselves primarily as a “me.”

It’s nothing new, though. It’s exactly the sort of thing described in the first part of today’s gospel reading. Jesus is standing in the courtyard of the Temple in Jerusalem, teaching to a crowd that has gathered to listen. He speaks harsh words about the scribes, who are a sort of cross between lawyers and religious leaders, some of whom have fallen in love with the status their religious and social leadership have brought them. Because of this, some have become wealthy by looking out for themselves, by cheating widows out of their homes in the courts through legal maneuvers, by imposing higher and higher religious taxes. They are portrayed as self-promoters who have stopped looking out for the good of the community and are looking out only for “Number One,” basking in the glory of their fancy clothes, reveling in people’s admiration and envy of their wealth and shrewdness, then cloaking it all with pious prayers and with talk about how much they love God. They give big contributions to the Temple, to be sure. They toss heavy silver coins into the Temple treasury, throwing them noisily into the thirteen trumpet-shaped brass tubes that funnel money down into storage chests, money destined for the care of the needy and necessities of the Temple ...but this represents only a small portion of their significant wealth, certainly not enough to matter to them, not enough to represent any kind of sacrifice. For the scribes Jesus is describing, the most important thing is being seen and admired. They care little for those in need, or for the larger community. It’s all about “me.” There is no sense of relationship in their giving. Their giving is painless, and is done for themselves, rather than for others, or out of love for God.

Immediately following this scathing commentary, Jesus leads his friends over to look at those treasury boxes. As they watch, a nameless, poverty-stricken widow, mixed in with the throng of people, perhaps one of the very widows who have been cheated out of their homes by the scribes, slips into the trumpet her two tiny, almost worthless coins, so tiny and light that they don't even make a noise. I once bought my father one of these coins as a gift. It was the thinnest little sliver of metal, not much thicker than aluminum foil, just about the size of my little fingernail. These coins were not even enough to buy the smallest bird for a sacrifice. So here is a needy woman giving her entire wealth—what the Greek text calls “her whole life”—for the needs of others, for the love of God, with no fanfare whatsoever. She is literally going “all in,” giving everything she has to her neighbor and to God. I think maybe Jesus points this out with a mixture of sadness and anger at the unfairness of it all, contrasting it with the self-interested, limited giving of the wealthy. But I think there is also praise for her sacrifice, for her willingness to be in relationship, for her extravagant generosity that doesn't count the cost.

Over the past weeks, we've talked a lot about relationships. We've talked about that fundamental relationship we have with God, the giver of every good gift, the One who out of great love for us showers us with grace and mercy that we cannot boast about as something we have earned, who offered his very own Son for us as a gift without counting the cost, and who gives us the gift of abundant life that will have no end. How can we not respond to that relationship in gratitude? And that same God provides rich resources day by day throughout our lives, generously providing for us and for all creation. But those resources are entrusted to us as gifts not just for ourselves, but for our neighbor as well. Jesus calls us to be in right relationship with those resources, recognizing them for what they are: blessings shared with us so we can share them with others, so we can be in relationship with others. How can we not respond with gratitude for those blessings? How can we not share them generously, as God intended?

In teaching Confirmation to Tyler Knohl this week, I was reminded of what Luther's *Small Catechism* says: “I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties. In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property—along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. And all this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.”

The Psalm today says that God “gives justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger. The LORD sets the captive free. The LORD opens the eyes of the blind; the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down.... The LORD cares for the stranger, the immigrant; the LORD sustains the orphan and widow....” Sisters and brothers, God does those things through *us*. God does that through the resources that we have been entrusted with as stewards. Those blessings you enjoy are given so you can be in relationship with your neighbor, so you can bless your neighbor. Christ calls you and me to be servants, to “go all in,” to be in a relationship of service with all those God calls us to serve. How can we not respond to that call, given all that God has done for us? How can we not respond sacrificially to those in need? God gives the gift of relationship with one another in the church, a relationship of mutual support and encouragement, a relationship that allows us to do together so much more than we could ever hope to do alone. We share our resources with one another not to perpetuate an institution, but so that together we can participate in the amazing things God is doing in our world, can participate in completing God's miracles. How can we not respond?

This isn't about feeling guilty because we're not as generous as that widow in the Temple. That's not the point. The point is that God has gifted us with relationships, and in response to those relationships, we can joyfully participate in something much larger than ourselves. The need is great. But we can respond with extravagant generosity because we are not alone...we are part of a “we.”

In the coming weeks you will be given an opportunity to make a commitment to giving of yourself: of your time, your talents, your treasure. On the last Sunday of this month, as an act of worship, we will offer up those commitments to God. I pray that we will come like that widow, quietly and humbly offering all that we have, all that we are, “going all in,” extravagantly responding to the God who has gone “all in” for us. I invite you to begin now to pray, asking how God is calling you to give of yourself, of all that you are and have, for the good of the world. Thanks be to God. AMEN