

**Grace Episcopal Church**  
 Proper 27, 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
 November 10, 2024

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

This morning we have made it to Jerusalem, and Jerusalem is crowded. It's Passover week, the time of one of Israel's major religious festivals. So people have travelled here from all over. They've come for the temple sacrifices, for the communion meals, for the prayers. The nation has gathered to acknowledge their dependence on their God, to remember their divine deliverance and be thankful for it, to thank their God for His continuing faithfulness to His own ancient covenant with them. The large plaza around the temple would have been teeming with life, and of course not every bit of that life was religious. People are complicated, capable of and always acting on the basis of more than one motivation. Some were there reuniting with family and friends. Others were hustling, trying to make a buck. Some were on the make, pushing their policies, peddling influence. With all their mixed motives, their various aspirations and achievements, they were gathered for one of the most important festivals of the year.

And Jesus was right there with them. Picture him standing in the plaza, looking out over the dust and bustle of the crowd. He's taking it all in, the sights, and smells, and noises of Israel's public life. I picture him actually closing his eyes and taking a slow, deep breath. I think Jesus was drawn to the raucous, hopeful, compromised public life of humanity. I think he still is. I bet he loves it.

And out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a movement. He turned and saw a group of religious leaders making their way through the crowd. Even from a distance, he could tell who they were. They wore long robes, and people moved out of their way, or they got themselves moved out of the way. They were the leading scribes and lawyers of the nation, the highest priests. These were the people's faith celebrities, so it was in fact probably a little exciting to see them walk by. Maybe everybody froze for a moment. And then, into the silence, Jesus whispered: "Beware of these guys. They like to walk around in long robes, and be greeted with respect in the marketplace. They love to have the best seats in the synagogues, and places of honor at banquets! But they devour widows' houses, and for the sake of appearances they say long prayers in public. They will receive the greater condemnation."

It was quite a claim, a pretty gutsy thing to say. "Even the religious bigwigs should expect condemnation if they're vain and rapacious" . . . that kind of talk could get a person in trouble. Yes, Jesus is drawn to and loves our crazy public life, but he's not blind to our shortcomings. I suspect he loves our shared life so much that he wants it to be healthy, to function at its best, for all of us, that we all might flourish.

So the moment passed, as quickly and dramatically as it had come. The power procession moved on, and was swallowed back into the crowd, and public life returned to its baseline buzz. So Jesus shifted his gaze. He looked over toward the other corner of the plaza, and over there a different human drama was unfolding. Over there, people were paying their temple taxes, and paying taxes in Jerusalem at Passover was also a pretty good show, like religious celebrities walking by. The liturgy of the national temple, the nation's worship, was supported by the members of the nation. Contributions were shared, and so contributing was a public activity. On special occasions, people gathered around and watched each other make their contributions. Jesus and the disciples probably watched people giving for a while. Some wealthy people rolled up and put large sums of money into the collection boxes. That was impressive. Then we heard what happened. A poor widow came up, and she put in two small coins. The contrast was startling, and everybody probably noticed. One person did more than notice. One person at least interpreted the contrast, thought about and articulated *what it meant*.

Jesus had zeroed in. He was fully present, and his imagination was humming. There in the busy, dusty life of the public, Jesus was doing what he always does, looking beyond the outward events. He was looking below the surface of what was happening to the deeper realities and implications. He shared what he found with his disciples. “Hey guys, look at this! I tell you what! That poor lady right there put in more money than all those rich people combined! You know why? They gave out of their abundance, but she gave out of her poverty. She gave everything she had, and that’s a perfect example of what I’ve been talking about for months. She’s living like a true subject of the Kingdom of God. Blessed are those who put in two pennies, who give out of their poverty, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.”

To Jesus, in his way of looking at what went on around him, religious leaders making an impressive public show and a widow doing her part as best she could to support public worship . . . these similar events proclaimed an essential truth. And the truth is this: There’s usually a difference between the apparent and the actual, between the superficial elements of an encounter and its real spiritual significance. Sometimes impressive appearances mask hypocrisy. Sometimes modest appearances hide significant depths.

Jesus was harsh and unrelenting when it came to religious hypocrisy. He still is. He’s constitutionally opposed to those who cultivate an impressive public righteousness while secretly, in private they are morally corrupt. Jesus also was (and still is) very keen to help people learn how to recognize and act on the deeper, more important currents of life. He longs for people to cultivate and employ their spiritual discernment. We’ve heard about him doing that, and also opposing hypocrisy again and again in the gospel of Mark. It’s what he wants us to do today, in our circles of influence, as we seek to follow him where we are and where we can make a difference.

So there’s more for us this morning in this gospel lesson; more than meets the eye, more to the message than the plain, moral sense of these stories about Israel’s public life. It’s always like that. The Word of God is rich; it’s superabundant. It has more lessons and meanings and applications than we can handle. Today’s gospel has some rich information for us about Jesus Christ, some more insights for us to consider about the Risen One. Something about this picture of Jesus and the disciples there at the center of the busy, dusty temple plaza attending to the health of their people’s public life really struck me this week, as we witnessed once again how deeply divided our own political life is right now. Jesus is with his people in today’s gospel, at the epicenter of their varied and compromised but also hopeful life together. And what’s he doing? He’s among them discerning and naming what’s real and true, and he’s calling out what is vain and the showy, the rapacious and the predatory. He’s with us in the same way, hoping to do the same thing: hoping the members of his church are active calling out what’s real and true, and as we prayed in the Collect of the Day, working to “destroy the works of the devil and make us children of God and heirs of eternal life.”

We are the body of Christ . . . now, here, at Grace Church, this week in our country. Though it might give us pause to say it out loud, in a very real sense we are Jesus in America today. But are we? Are we standing in the open plaza of American public life, watching all the sordid and encouraging dramas unfold, and being Christ like? Are we naming truth and opposing evil? Are we looking past the outward appearances and all the posturing intended only to hide corruption? May God’s Spirit continue to strengthen us to do so, to live faithfully and courageously as the Body of Christ, for each other, for our neighbors, and for the life of the world. Amen.