

There was a little boy who rode the bus to & from school each day. One day, the girl across the aisle from him was finishing off some grapes left over from her lunch. The boy asked her if she had any more; she said she didn't but that she did have an apple left from her snack because her mom always packed a lot. The little boy pulled out his favorite dinosaur – it was in pretty sorry shape – and offered to give it to the girl in exchange for her apple. She agreed and the boy consumed the apple hungrily. So began a little partnership. Each day, the boy would bring one of his best toys from home – they were all battered, broken, & well-used – to trade for the girl's extra food. Though eating on the bus wasn't allowed, the driver turned a blind eye because he knew the boy didn't get much at home. This story sounds like something you might encounter in a large urban area. Or perhaps it sounds like a manufactured morality piece. But it's a true story that happened right here in Cook and it happened within just a couple blocks of Trinity. The harsh reality is that nearly 50% of Americans are still one paycheck or crisis away from poverty and the US ranks 34th out of 35 economically advanced countries in terms of child poverty. Only Romania has more impoverished children per capita. This area of St. Louis County has a 24% poverty level. The percentage of children living in poverty is even higher.

We are a society that praises success and power, especially when coupled with wealth. The more money a person has, the more influence they wield and the more respect they are accorded. This is how society defines a person's worth. Those who struggle to make ends meet or who rely on assistance to stay afloat are often judged and shamed by others. How many times have you heard comments like: If they're so poor, why do they keep having kids? If they don't have money, why do they buy junk food? If they're on assistance, they shouldn't be smoking. They must be lazy, an addict, or mentally deficient if they can't find a job. The list goes on. They are the opposite of what society values. At the very least, those who don't meet the definition of a "productive" or "valuable" person are marginalized and considered inconsequential. They are invisible.

There is an underlying concern in today's Gospel passage about the tendency of the church as a whole to heap praise and attention on those who contribute a lot of time or especially money to the church and to marginalize those who don't contribute much at all. You know the ones – they just come once in a while or just put a little bit – or maybe even nothing – into the offering plate. They don't fit the model of what a "good" Christian is. But how many of those "inconsequential" folks have completely stopped attending Trinity in recent years and how many folks have actually noticed? Perhaps the better question is, how many folks have reached out to them? Those who don't meet expectations, whether in the church or out in society, are simply forgotten, as if they were never here. Yet, there are people right outside our doors and in this congregation who are in need – physical need and/or spiritual need – and, as Christians, we are called to answer those needs. That is why we have food drives, that is why we contribute clothing, that is why we visit the sick and the home-bound, that is why we preach the Gospel.

Today's gospel passage invites us to take a good, hard look inside ourselves and challenges us to live authentically. What is our motivation for doing what we do? Do we make big displays of our piety or generosity or humility, in a way saying, "Look at me. I'm God's number one fan"? Are we doing things solely because we think we're supposed to or because it looks good to others, but there's no sincerity to back it up? Or is our piety, generosity, compassion, humility born out of love and faith? Now, we all put on an act now and then. Truth be told, there are days when I don't feel very Christian at all. But that's different than living falsely for your own glory. Regardless, we're not ever in a position to judge another person's motivation or sincerity. That is entirely between each person and God.

Which brings us to the story of the widow. On more than one occasion over the years, I've heard this text used to push giving more of our time, talents, and money to the church. *If the widow could give her last two coins, surely you can give more.* We've all heard the pitch. But what if this story isn't about that? What if this story is actually about Christ? Christ, who was at home among the insignificant, the worthless, the invisible, those pushed to the margins. He offered a gift that many considered worthless. Yet that worthless gift, from someone who was despised and rejected by the masses, brought salvation to the world. What if this is a story about lifting up and seeing the power and worth of the insignificant, the worthless, the invisible? Jesus has told us all throughout Mark that those things that society values – success, status, wealth, power, looking good to the right people – are worthless in heaven. But those things that society considers insignificant – kindness, humility, generosity, compassion – those are the things with real value.

Because of All Saints Day last Sunday, we did the John reading instead of the reading from Mark, which is the passage just before today's. I'm going to mention it here, because I think it's the capstone of what Jesus has been saying. When he was asked what the greatest commandment was, he said love the lord in your entirety, and, second, love your neighbor the same way you love yourself. There are no other commandments as important as these two.

We are called to live generous, compassionate, faith-filled lives. We are called to feed the hungry, lift up the weak, see the invisible. We are called to serve one another, welcome strangers, share the Gospel. And we are called to love – without judgment, without strings, without reservation. Amen.