

FLIPPED: Law/Love
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
March 6, 2016

Mark 12: 28-44

I have this amazing ability to zone out. Don't be jealous... it's a skill!

My ability usually manifests itself after a long day in the office; I walk in the back door of the house, kick off my shoes, sit in the recliner, make myself a cup of tea and just stare out the front window. And when I zone out, you could be carrying on a conversation with me, calling my name, asking me a question or doing jumping jacks in my presence and honestly, I would have no idea.

I remember the moment about a dozen years ago when I realized I had this superpower. There I was, sitting on the couch watching TV, and when the commercial aired I got up and started walking to the kitchen. That's when I noticed that my young daughter had been sitting on the couch with me. How long had she been there? I wasn't quite sure. I remember giving her a peck on the cheek and saying "Love You" before leaving the room.

When I came back I noticed that her face was clouded with disappointment and that she was holding a pen and a brightly colored sheet of paper. "What's that?" I asked. "Mom, didn't you hear me?" she replied. "We have to drop off this Girl Scout cookie order form to the leader today." She had been calling my name and speaking to me for the last five minutes, asking if I could take her, and I simply wasn't paying attention.

Jesus, in the gospel of Mark, has some similar conversations with the religious leaders of the day. He pointed out their inattentiveness to the needs of the people and told them that their words of love expressed to God rang hollow too.

The scribes were part of the religious leadership that taught people what was "right" according to Jewish religious law. They were responsible for monitoring their people to be sure that they did the right thing. Not an easy task, since there were 613 directives in the Torah to keep straight!

I recently learned that Scribes were also considered to be a kind of probate lawyer. When a man died, if his widow was left without sons, she was considered to be without a protector. A Scribe would step to help her manage her late husband's estate. The only problem was, not every scribe was ethical. Many took advantage of their newfound opportunity for wealth and took what they believed could be theirs out of the widow's inheritance.

The Jewish community was set up as a covenantal one; where love of God and love of neighbor were one and the same. You love God by loving neighbor. You love neighbor by loving God. They cannot be separated. However they had been separated by the very people who should know better and Jesus calls them out on it.

What would you do if you were Jesus? What would you do if you found yourself being questioned by people who clearly weren't paying any attention, who were lost in the details of what was right and what was wrong, who seem to have forgot God's most basic rule?

When I hear the passage in sequence, it's clear to me that the little story about the Widow's mite at the end has a completely different meaning than I thought it did. Because it seems to me now that Jesus' comment is descriptive, rather than proscriptive. That widow? She's our neighbor too. And when she clinks her two small coins in the basket, she gives it all. And maybe that's not right.

This past fall we explored several prophets who warned the kings and their people about their unfaithfulness. This was expressed in their worship of other Gods which led them to no longer care for their neighbor, especially the widow, the orphans and immigrants in their midst. But love of God and Love of Neighbor are forever linked.

When we separate them, we stand the risk of becoming imbalanced. Our worship of God, without care for neighbor in prayer and action, feels shallow. And love of neighbor, without reverence for God, can make us feel untethered, as if we are out to save the world all on our own. But we're not.

Today we have gathered an offering for One Great Hour of Sharing (OGHS) a special mission offering of the United Church of Christ which works in disaster aid, refugee assistance, and development ministries throughout the world. When a disaster strikes or people are displaced by violence or

extreme poverty, One Great Hour of Sharing is part of the immediate response and of the long-term recovery.

One Great Hour of Sharing also walks with committees over the long term, offering holistic development programs including health care, education, agriculture, food sustainability, micro-financing and women's empowerment.

In both its disaster and sustainable development ministries, they are committed to embodying Jesus' commandment to Love God and Love our Neighbors. They walk with people as they redeem life-situations that seem impossible; help them learn to sustain their communities for the long-term; and assist in creating innovative strategies for organizing life together differently for the sake of peace and justice.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached about loving our neighbors with "the fierce urgency of now." We seek to sustain communities TODAY even when wholeness seems unlikely, working for long-term change of root causes that threaten a population.

One Great Hour of Sharing has been working for a number of years with the people living in refugee camps in Darfur, in the western part of the Sudan. Some of you may know that the people of Darfur are caught in the midst of a perfect storm of disruption: drought caused by climate change, political tensions, limited access to oil and mineral resources have all created instability. The subsequent violence has killed many and forced hundreds of thousands into refugee camps.

This has been going on since 2004, and there is no clear end in sight. There are youth who have spent their entire lives in a refugee camp. Can you imagine? How do even try and fix that? How do you cope when a temporary safe haven becomes a permanent place in which you must survive?

Through your gifts to One Great Hour of Sharing, The United Church of Christ is part of a global coalition of church humanitarian work still active in refugee camps of Darfur. This group provides people with water, food, shelter, sanitation, psycho-social support, and conflict reconciliation techniques they otherwise could not access.

While many secular non-governmental organizations have shifted their attention elsewhere, seeing no end in sight, the United Church of Christ has committed to stay. Will we forget our neighbors and move on? Or will we figure out how to transform temporary surviving into permanent thriving? Their work is an exercise in fulfilling God's Good News, and it is becoming a model for the rest of the world in how to meet long term humanitarian need.

Sometimes it feels as if the problems of the world are so great, and we are so small. Our two coins can't do much when it comes to solving problems halfway around the world with global neighbors we may never meet.

On the other hand, think of all of the good things that are being done on our behalf through One Great Hour of Sharing. Our combined generosity does so much good in the world. So that the widow in Darfur does not have to give her last two coins for bread and water. So that the teenager raised in a refugee camp has an education and some hope instead of sinking into destruction or despair.

In this and so many other ways, God is sitting on the couch right next to us calling our name and inviting us to be a part of a new kingdom here on earth. May we keep paying attention, today and always. Amen.