



Sunday, November 10, 2024
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 12:38-22
“Truth Telling”
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

On November 5...1872, Susan B. Anthony cast her vote for president of the United States. Then she was arrested.

Four days earlier, on November 1, Anthony headed for the local barbershop in her hometown of Rochester, NY. She was not going to get a haircut. The barbershop had been set up as an office of voter registration. Anthony strode in and demanded that her name be added to the list of registered voters. Here is the well-preserved transcript of that encounter: [READ]

Susan B. Anthony did in fact cast a ballot in the presidential election on November 5, 1872. She voted for the incumbent, Ulysses S. Grant. But as the transcript suggests, that was not the end of the story. Two weeks later she was arrested. A hearing was held to determine if she had, in fact, broken the law. The transcript we heard was from the court’s interview with the three young men who registered her as a voter on November 1, 1872, and accepted her ballot at the polls on Election Day.

In June 1873 Anthony was put on trial, convicted, and fined \$100 for voting illegally. She later denounced the affair as “the greatest judicial outrage history has ever recorded.” But this was not the end of the story. When the fine was handed down, she announced, “I shall never pay a dollar of your unjust penalty”—and she never did. To this day, every Election Day voters in Rochester stream to her grave in Mt. Hope Cemetery to place their “I Voted” stickers on her headstone.

Why did we plunge into the history of women’s suffrage when the subject of our Gospel text today is the widow who put all she had into the temple treasury? Because both women were victims of an unjust system.

Concerning women’s right to vote, the framers of our Constitution were silent on exactly who had this right. Originally they left it up to the states. Most initially gave voting rights to white male property owners and then extended it to all white men. In 1868, the 14th Amendment guaranteed US citizens the entitlement to participate in the civil and political life of society and the state, as we heard Susan B. Anthony point out. But the amendment specifically identified “voters” as male, because those who wrote and ratified it believed that women were incapable of independent thought and could not be counted on to vote responsibly. As early as the 1840s women began speaking out. Then came Susan B. Anthony, yet it took until 1920 for 19th Amendment to be passed giving women this right – although it took much for women from marginalized communities to be fully enabled as voters.

Now consider the widow in our Gospel reading. Typically she is held up as a model example of sacrificial giving. If you listen to what Jesus is saying, it’s clear that is not what’s going on at all. Instead we see her as a member of an oppressed class compelled by an unjust system to give everything she had.

As keepers of the holy scriptures, scribes promoted themselves as trustworthy. But as Jesus makes clear, they were often arrogant, full of pretense, and worse still, they preyed ON the very people they were supposed to be praying FOR.

In saying they “devour widows’ houses,” Jesus was referring to the common practice of scribes embezzling from widows’ estates. Widows had no rights or legal protection in Jewish society. Just as the framers of our Constitution didn’t trust women to vote responsibly, widows in Jesus’ time weren’t trusted to manage their affairs. The supposedly trustworthy scribes were appointed to handle their assets, but instead they routinely stole from their assets. Scribes literally devoured widows’ estates and then tried to conceal their guilt with long, showy prayers. This is why Jesus says that they will receive the greater condemnation.

By seating himself across from the temple treasury as the widow approaches, Jesus makes the point to his disciples about how she is the victim of an unjust system. The temple system placed a heavy obligation on people to make regular freewill offerings. This created long lines at the temple treasury every day. The wealthy were in the habit of making a show of the large coins they threw noisily into the offering boxes – the bigger the coins, the larger the value. The widow’s two tiny coins would have made only a dull ping.

Following on his condemnation of the scribes, the text makes clear that Jesus was not praising the widow for sacrificial giving. He was critiquing the value system that conditioned her to do what was inhumane – to compel her to give away everything she had, all she had to live on.

Jesus and Susan B. Anthony were truth-tellers. No one in 33 AD but Jesus saw clearly how unjust that temple system was. No one in 1872 but Susan B. Anthony saw clearly how unjust the system of voting laws was. In fact, she later called her trial “the greatest judicial outrage history has ever recorded.”

To be truth-tellers we need to look unjust systems in the face and ask, as Jesus and Susan B. Anthony did, “How can this be?”

Begin with family. The most pressing issue we are facing at the moment is the dark division that is threatening to devour us as a people. Family members find themselves pitted against each other -- husband against wife, mother-in-law against son-in-law, brother against sister, friend against friend. Members of my own extended family and group of friends are finding themselves taken aback by stark differences that have rocketed to the surface.

The product could be confusion, anger, and fear. Yet we cannot let these define us. If you choose to ignore it all, it will fester beneath the surface. Instead, bring all powers of love to bear in asking, “How can this be?” What was the impulse? The motivation? What can you learn from and about the other person by gently asking questions? Only through compassion that seeks a sense of common purpose can we push through the darkness toward the light of Christ that, even still, unites all God’s people.

From family, then move to community. Our area is experiencing a suffocating crisis of affordable housing. How can this be? How can it be that one third of residents cannot afford the home or

apartment they are living in? How can it be that the lack of rent control regulations allows landlords to increase prices exponentially at will? How can it be that NIMBY attitudes continue to crush well-planned and well-financed proposals for multi-family projects that would strengthen, not weaken, communities? How can it be that what little vacant land there still is keeps getting gobbled up by luxury developers?

In declaring that condemnation will be greater for scribes parading their superior status, those who were supposedly blessed by God, Jesus singlehandedly exposes the entire apparatus that maintained the system of oppression of his day. Let us, like him, be fearless truth-tellers.

If you don't know what the unjust systems in our midst are, talk to people. Especially, talk to people from different walks of life. Our Soup Suppers are perfect place to do that. Every week we share fellowship with a wide cross-section of souls who come for a nourishing meal and the hope that community provides. Talk with them about what they are experiencing. Some are unhoused; some are marginally housed. You can learn a lot from them.

Martin Luther famously said that "A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is." Let us be confident theologians of the cross in our truth-telling.

But whatever you do, let it be done in love. In God we trust, but in the love of Christ lies our only hope. Let us BE CHRIST to one another. The life of our nation, the well-being of our community, and the future of our church all depend on it.