

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

November 10, 2024

Broken Systems

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

We've stepped away from the Markan Gospel narrative for a couple of weeks now, spending the last two Sundays in John's Gospel instead. While Reformation Sunday and All Saints' Sunday are very important, we find ourselves dropping back into Mark's narrative without a lot of necessary literary context.

So, let's start with a summary of what's been happening in Mark's Gospel leading up to our reading today. Mark 11 begins with Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. That is followed by Jesus cursing the fig tree and then cleansing the Temple. I will highlight for you verse 18 of Mark 11, which immediately follows the Temple cleansing: "And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him, for they were afraid of him because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching."¹ This new, more contentious reality, kicks off a series of arguments between Jesus and various members of the religious system.

Mark 11:27-33 centers on an argument over authority between Jesus and the chief priests, scribes, and elders. This argument leads into the Parable of the Wicked Tenants which ends with this verse: "When [the chief priests, scribes, and elders] realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away." The very next verse sees that same group sending Pharisees and Herodians to trap Jesus on the topic of taxes.

After taxes we have some Sadducees sent to argue with Jesus about resurrection. That is followed by a scribe asking which commandment is the first of all. That interaction is ended with these words: "After that no one dared to ask him any question."² After that statement, Jesus offers a pointed teaching regarding his authority in relation to King David.

¹ Mark 11:18 (NRSVUE)

² Mark 12:34c

I'm providing this contextual summary for one very specific reason. The temptation is very great to focus preaching on this text on the widow. The accompanying text about the widow of Zarephath from 1 Kings only serves to reinforce this proclivity. But when we consider the greater literary context, we find that we should be paying closer attention to conflict rather than the example of the widow.

Jesus has been having a back-and-forth argument with the religious leaders of his time for two chapters now. This back-and-forth culminates with (well, the cross really, but for now) the warning Jesus issues regarding those self-serving religious leaders and the system they oversee. Beware! Jesus says. Beware of those who use systems to take advantage of others, especially the most vulnerable.

Jesus is critiquing the systems of his time and their cruel disinterest in the poor and marginalized. These systems, which are laid on the foundation of God's Law, have evolved in ways that are not life-giving. God has given us what we need to order our lives and communities in healthy ways. Ways that meet the needs of every member of our community. But upon the numerous teachings from the Hebrew Bible regarding care for the orphan and widow,³ has been laid a system that consumes the meager resources of the poor rather than protecting them. Leading Jesus to describe this system as one that "devour[s] widows' houses."⁴

I wonder how Jesus might describe the systems we have raised up here in 21st Century America. For being a nation supposedly founded on Christian values, how well do we take care of the vulnerable and marginalized? How well do we treat our prisoners and immigrants? Do we clothe the naked and house the homeless? How about hunger?

Surely a system that allows a widow to go bankrupt supporting it will take care of that same widow, right? Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." What do we make of that? Is this a commendation of the widow or a continued critique of the system? Is it good that she "has put in everything she had, all she had to live on" into a system designed to take advantage of her? I'm not sure Jesus is commending the widow so much as condemning the system she feels she must participate in.

³ E.g. Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 10:18; Deuteronomy 14:29; Deuteronomy 26:12; Isaiah 1:17; Jeremiah 49:11

⁴ Mark 12:40

We're not that far removed from Reformation Sunday and the critique of the religious systems of Luther's time. Luther saw the church taking advantage of the most vulnerable and rejected the sale of indulgences. How are our systems today reminiscent of the systems of Luther's time? Of Christ's time? Are we very far removed? Or have the same systems of exploitation and oppression generally perpetuated themselves over the generations? I know what my reading of history suggests.

We are surrounded by broken systems. When Jesus saw broken systems, he challenged the leaders and beneficiaries of those systems. He called for a return to what God intended, a community, a world, where all needs are met. A world where widow's houses are not devoured. A world where strangers are welcomed. A world where the hungry are fed and the naked clothed. A world in which reconciliation, rehabilitation, and reparation are the goal rather than retribution and criminal punishment.

The Way of Christ is a way of challenging our human and systemic brokenness. The Way of Christ is an invitation to reflect on how our participation in various systems affects people around the world. The Way of Christ means working toward a kingdom or kin-dom in which the vulnerable are not forced to participate in their own oppression. The Way of Christ recognizes the humanity and dignity of every living being and seeks to protect and support that life.

You can hear in this teaching a call to give up what we have. And that is well and good, we heard that same point in Christ's interaction with the rich man recently. But I'm not sure that's the main point here. Rather, this is the culmination of a lengthy critique of the Temple system of Christ's time. And with the Lutheran understanding of *semper reformanda*, always reforming, we understand our responsibilities towards our neighbor today include the critique of our systems: religious, cultural, economic, political, and otherwise.

And the question at the heart of our always reforming critique of our systems should be this: is our system concerned with whole-i-ness? Do our systems treat people as whole people? People deserving of respect and dignity? Do our systems consider their impact on the whole person? The whole community? The whole world? Or are our systems more concerned with benefiting those at the top? Providing places of honor for them, with lots of respect and power for a few, while the majority suffer?

I end this sermon with some facts about the results our current systems produce, all from the last three years:

- In 2023 36.8 million people fell below the poverty threshold of \$30,900 for a family of four
- Of that number 11 million were children under age 18
- A record-high 653,104 people experienced homelessness on a single night in January 2023. This is more than a 12.1 percent increase over the previous year.
- Firearms were the leading cause of death among American children in 2023.
- There have been at least 69 school shootings in the United States so far this year, as of October 28. Nineteen were on college campuses, and 50 were on K-12 school grounds. There were 82 in 2023.
- The United States currently incarcerates 2.2 million people, nearly half of whom are non-violent drug offenders, accused people held pre-trial because they cannot afford their bail, and others who have been arrested for failure to pay debts or fines for minor infractions. The incarceration rate is now more than 4.3 times what it was nearly 50 years ago.
- From 2019 to 2022, the rate of maternal mortality cases in Texas rose by 56%, compared with just 11% nationwide during the same time period, an increase in the death of mothers driven by Texas' abortion ban.
- In 2023, the SPLC documented 1,430 hate and antigovernment extremist groups that comprise the organizational infrastructure upholding white supremacy in the U.S.
- In 2023, according to the US Justice dept, there were 11,862 hate crimes committed in the US.

There, a small sampling of the results of our current systems. I wonder what Christ might say about them. No, I don't. I know exactly what he would say. We have work to do. Amen.