

## THE WRONG KIND OF RELIGION Vs. THE EXTRAVAGANCE OF LOVE

Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17; Psalm 127; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson  
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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

If I were directing a movie of a contemporary production of our Gospel lesson the opening scene would be a wide angle shot of an ecclesiastical meeting. The camera scans a beautiful, richly appointed sanctuary bathed in the soft glow of <sup>sunlight</sup> sun streaming through Tiffany stained glass windows. Clergy wearing colorful gowns are seated prominently in the chancel. The camera zooms in on the speaker addressing the assembly. He's come quite a distance to tell us what he's seen around the world of hunger -- children with bloated stomachs dying of malnutrition, their mothers, widows, cradling their starving infants in their arms. <sup>At 12 noon</sup> The speaker is interrupted by a clergyman seated in the chancel. He reminds the assembly that it's lunch time. A debate follows as to whether to break for lunch or to let the guest speaker finish telling us about world hunger. Lunch wins. That actually happened at a Presbytery meeting last year. Many of us did not miss the irony of the situation but, I must add, it was very uncharacteristic of our Presbytery which is a leader in our denomination for mission giving.

Unfortunately, so many people view religious leaders as hypocrites. <sup>more interested in our wallets than the hungry fathers</sup> All of us ministers, I must admit, have enough of the love of prominence to feel very uncomfortable with the way Jesus described religious leaders of his day. What he says makes me squirm. I put on my clerical collar, come in to my study, put my Geneva gown on with my preaching tabs and embroidered stole, look in the mirror and say -- "Wow, don't I look impressive?" I get invited to public functions -- get wonderful free meals, often served first, all for saying a prayer. And after the prayer I lean over and ask Kay, "How was the prayer?" Reminds me of a story I heard about President Lyndon Johnson. He was seated around a table with all kinds of big-wigs. Before eating he called on his press secretary, Bill Moyers, who is a minister, to pray. Moyers was seated at the far end of the table far away from Johnson. In the middle of his prayer, President Johnson interrupted -- "Bill, speak up, I can't hear you." Moyers responded, "Mr. President, I'm not talking to you." So often prominent people develop an inflated opinion of themselves. So often political leaders come across as being more interested in their own prominence and power and place in history than they are in the good of the people.

Now, if the first scene in my movie focuses on the folly of religious professionals, the second scene focuses on a pew. <sup>on a Sunday morning</sup> An 80 year old widow opens her pocketbook as the collection plate is passed down the aisle. She searches her pocketbook and finds just one dollar. That's all she has after paying rent, utilities, prescriptions, food and clothing. She has no discretionary money. Not investments. And she's sees the plate coming down the aisle filled with twenty dollar bills. She sees \$100, \$200 checks. She's embarrassed because she has only a dollar to put in the plate. She's tempted to put nothing in rather than the little she has. At the last moment she crumples up the dollar and puts it in hoping no one can tell how much it is.

Jesus presents us with two contrasting views of religion. One views religion as a matter of arrogance, blind to the spiritual and physical needs of people, self-centered, desiring prominence – claiming to have the truth – the only truth – rather than pointing to the One we have come to recognize as the Truth. Religionists who have so many privileges who want still more privilege. The other views the extravagance of religion that loves God and neighbor wholeheartedly.

Apply what Jesus said about religion to politics. <sup>Andrew</sup> The leaders Jesus spoke of were political as well as religious leaders. So when I hear what Jesus says I see a political convention, either the Democratic or Republican. I see powerful and wealthy interest groups pouring millions of dollars into the election. Millions of dollars with the hope of getting an invitation to the inaugural ball, a night in the Lincoln bedroom – an invitation to dinner with still more power and influence. What if all those groups had the people in their best interest. Imagine what that money could do if applied to education, social security and health care.

But more valuable than all that money pouring into the coffers of political parties is our vote. Our votes are more powerful than all those contributions. The New York Times this past Friday quoted Helen Halperin, an 81 year old widow from Palm Beach County, Florida. "I was so troubled" she said. "But, I thought, 'One vote. How much could that count?'" How many of us have said, "My vote doesn't count?" I hope I never hear that again. In some nations people risk their lives to vote. They walk for miles just to cast a vote. <sup>Veterans Day</sup> Some of you have fought in wars to preserve our right to vote. We may feel our vote doesn't count. But that widow's vote can sway the future. Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are

contributing to the treasury." Helen Halperin put in more than all those corporations and interests groups. She gave all she had. She voted. Our votes can sway the future.

Think about how much Jesus talked about money, about economics. Some people say Jesus talked more about money than anything else. Economics continues to be at the center of spiritual decision-making. Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of scribes in their scheme to bilk widows out of their money and homes. He pierces us with the arrow of shame by drawing attention to a widow who gives her all. Giving is measured not by its count, but its cost; not by its amount, but its portion; not by what is given, but by what is kept; not by money, but by spirit.

Those of us who are wealthy and prominent have a great responsibility. Jesus once said we who have greater privilege and power and wealth also have greater responsibility for the poor, the weak, the marginalized. Instead of arguing our rights and seeking more prominence, the Spirit of Christ turns our gaze to widows and orphans, the poor and marginalized. We have a responsibility for the less fortunate. I'm so grateful for all that God has given me -- I have a place of prominence in this community as do so many of us. Business leaders, teachers, officials, volunteers. We have a great responsibility and a great opportunity to serve the Lord. We enjoy so many privileges not because we're better than others or because we pulled ourselves up by the bootstraps. God has blessed us with so much so that we might be a blessing to others. We may not be millionaires. Most of us aren't. But most of us are privileged just by living in the United States where we can vote. But we have a greater privilege than that. The greatest privilege is knowing Jesus Christ as the Way and the Truth and Life for all people everywhere. Whatever privilege, power, prominence we have -- God calls us and holds us to be responsible, more responsible than those with less money, power, authority, prominence or knowledge of God -- to use all we have -- not to further our own status, but to build up the Kingdom of God and of His Christ.