

Sermon 11-11-18
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Trinity Lutheran Church
W. Hempstead, NY
Using the Gospel for the 25th Sunday after Pentecost Mark 12:38-44

Putting In Everything

Today is a special day of remembrance. One hundred years ago today, November 11th, 1918, an armistice between Germany and the allies was signed ending the main fighting of World War I. After four years of total war and over 17 million combat deaths, the guns were silenced at 11am of the 11th day of the 11th month. One of my great uncles died for France. Another died for Germany. My maternal grandfather was injured fighting for Germany. My father's stepfather fought with the American Expeditionary Forces.

In my growing years I was much more familiar with the more recently concluded Second World War in which my father and uncles participated. The new medium of television put it into our living rooms with the Victory At Sea program. But the horrors and politics of the first war greatly shaped the world we live in.

Three European Christian empires collapsed: the Russian, Austro-Hungarian and German. Their monarchs were either killed or abdicated. Their thrones vanished replaced by new parliamentary or revolutionary governments. Many new European nations were created out of the old empires. Poland was reconstituted after having vanished two hundred years earlier.

The Muslim Ottoman Turkish Empire also collapsed after many centuries of rule. A secular government took over Turkey. The empire's territories were broken up into new nation states whose boundaries were artificially constructed by politicians in Europe. There is much turmoil and fighting in the Middle East today because these boundaries do not accurately reflect the aspirations of the various people groups of the Middle East. For instance, a significant population – the Kurds – found themselves divided between three new countries, without a country of their own. It's also why vicious strongmen like Syria's Assad have to be in power. Otherwise, these artificial nations break up into warring clans.

Most importantly, the territory of Palestine was carved out of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the war. It would be administered by Britain until 1948 when it was divided into the present day states of Israel and Jordan.

One other important thing happened in the Ottoman Empire. The war became the excuse for the first massive genocide of the modern era. In 1915 the Muslim Turks persecuted the Armenian Christians in their territories almost unto death, without any consequences from the rest of the world. Later, when Hitler came to power, he noted this fact and boldly set about eradicating Jews.

During World War I the Christian nations of Europe invoked the living God against one another. The massive loss of life shook the Christian church in Europe to its core. Peter Hitchens, once an atheist and brother of the late atheist leader, Christopher Hitchens, notes in his book, The Rage Against God, that before the first

war, British churches were full. After the war they were half empty. And after the second war they were three quarters empty.¹ The war produced many scoffers who abandoned Christianity and taught others to do likewise.

In Russia, post-war, a new experiment in human existence began. Communists under Vladimir Lenin took charge in late 1917. Their regime was not solidified until the Red Armies won a civil war in 1921.

The new Russian Marxist state was founded upon atheism. Therefore, the ancient alliance between the Christian Russian Czars and the Russian Orthodox Church was dismantled. In effect, God was kicked out of Russia. Churches were torn down or turned into museums or stables. A form of Christianity retained for the older people under priests controlled by the Communist party. But the new generations were schooled under atheist neo-paganism.

From ancient times until this very day the root of paganism is the denial that the universe has a Creator God. That's how generations of Russian children were schooled from 1917 until the fall of Russian Communism in 1991.

During the Soviet period Christians were persecuted vigorously in Russia. Millions died in prison camps – the gulags – described by Alexander Solzhenitsyn in his great work, the Gulag Archipelago. In the later years of the Soviet Union, anyone who converted from atheism and became a believer in Jesus Christ and the Creator God was deemed mentally insane for doing so, and was thus sent off to an appropriate insane asylum/re-education camp.

Therefore, when modern Russia emerged from communism, most of its people were atheists. But there has been significant change especially in the last decade. A majority of Russians now believe in the Creator God of the Bible.

Love him or hate him, Vladimir Putin has had the vision to restore the ancient Constantinian relationship between church and state. The Russian Orthodox Church is again the official church of Russia. For better or worse it is greatly favored over all other brands of Christianity. In the last several decades over 28,000 Russian Orthodox churches have been rebuilt, including the great cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. My son, Matthew, who lives in Moscow, sees new churches going up on his daily commute to work. Vladimir Putin wants Russia to be an Orthodox Christian nation. In Christianity he sees the metaphysical and spiritual foundation necessary to govern his people. For Christianity's worldview – its understanding of human origins, life's meaning, human morality and human destiny – makes much more sense than atheism.

On Friday, we had a video call with our son, Matthew and his family. In the course of the call, our almost nine-year-old granddaughter and third grader, Brynja, showed us a project she had made in school. She's being educated in Russian at the Russian equivalent of a Waldorf school. It was a booklet made from large construction paper – something like 24 inches by 18. On each left hand page was writing describing her artwork on the right hand page.

The booklet was about the six days of creation as narrated in Genesis. Brynja had painted seven pictures. The cover was the formless state at the beginning of creation. Inside, on the left hand page was written the creation narrative for each of

¹ Hitchens, Peter *The Rage Against God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010) p. 80

the six days of creation and on the right was the picture she had painted describing that day.

I was absolutely stunned. Brynja *does not* attend a church parochial school. This is a Waldorf type school for the Russian elite. And yet, they had taught her the biblical narrative of earth's origin. There is no way I would have come home with such a project from my American public school. Certainly my children brought home no such project from this public school system. I don't think my parents would have brought home such a project, and perhaps not even those of my grandparents who were educated in the U.S. But in Russia, the land that a hundred years ago pioneered the great atheist experiment of communism, my granddaughter is learning the biblical narrative of creation in public education. As one who lived through the cold war I find this almost incomprehensible! Yet, it is symptomatic of the revival of Christianity that is taking place in Eastern Europe and other places in the world. Jesus' words are true. He said, in Matthew 16:18, "... I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."

Meanwhile, here in the U.S. we're going in the opposite direction. The alumni magazine of the interdenominational seminary I graduated from, Union Theological Seminary, New York, is now called "Union Collective." I wonder what is meant by collective? I've heard that before in Marxism. Inside I found a story about Union students and faculty organizing and participating in something called the "Poor People's Campaign." It held a rally in D.C. where some Union students got arrested for protesting. The aim of the campaign sounds noble. "The basic humanity of every individual requires there be certain basic rights for everybody, from a decent wage, to a decent place to live, to decent health care. Those are all things people shouldn't have to worry about, and we all share those values."

However, ever since Adam and Eve brought down judgment upon themselves and were kicked out of Eden we've all had to worry about those things. I'd love to know where in the Bible God promises that we'll never have to concern ourselves with them ever again before Jesus returns.

In reality such noble sentiments reflect the desire to erect a Marxist utopia on earth. Such a thing has failed every time it's been tried in the last 100 years. In the most recent example, much was promised to the poor of Venezuela twenty years ago. Now, fifty thousand Venezuelans a day are trying to enter Columbia to escape starvation and rampant inflation. Here in the U.S. a war on poverty was declared in the mid 1960's. Yet, after trillions of dollars spent on the poor we still need this "Poor People's Campaign." Something is not right.

Again, here is a quote from Peter Hitchens: "Soviet power was ... the opposite of faith in God. It was faith in the greatness of humanity and in the perfectibility of human society."² Now, the bible declares such perfectibility to be impossible until Jesus returns to do it for those who have believed in Him. And yet, faith in social perfectibility of the soviet kind is what my old seminary is teaching – as well as almost every university in the country. I'm as equally stunned by Union Seminary as I am by what my granddaughter is being taught!

² Ibid. p. 164.

Here's a wonderful insight from former Communist sympathizer, Peter Hitchens. "God is the leftist's chief rival. Christian belief, by subjecting all men to divine authority and by asserting in the words 'My kingdom is not of this world' that the ideal society does not exist in this life, is the most coherent and potent obstacle to secular utopianism. Christ's reproof of Judas – 'the poor ye always have with you' ... (See John 12:1-8 KJV) is also a stumbling block and annoyance to world reformers... the Bible angers and frustrates those who believe that the pursuit of a perfect society justifies the quest for absolute power."³

This tells us what socialism and communism is really all about. It's not about the poor. It never has been. It's all about anger and power – anger at God's refusal to establish a perfect society on this earth, and power to overthrow God and establish a perfect society of our own making. Let no Christian be deceived and persuaded otherwise.

We end today by considering the desperately poor widow of this morning's gospel lesson. Again, Mark 12:41-44, "41 Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. 42 But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. 43 Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, 'I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. 44 They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on.'"

For what was Jesus commending this woman? Certainly it was not the size of her gift. Why, then, was He commending her? It all had to do with her love for her Creator and her faith in Him.

This woman gave Yahweh her all. I know if it were me, I probably would have given Yahweh one coin and spent the other on food. But she gave to the Lord everything she had. In effect she gave herself. For, if she were going to continue to live, she would have to be utterly and completely dependent upon God. With those two copper coins she gave herself to God, utterly and completely.

It's clear this woman did not consider herself a victim. People lost in victimhood tend to be bitter, self-centered and stingy. They tend to be angry, always looking for someone or something to blame for their misfortunes, either real or perceived. Indeed, this widow easily could have blamed God for refusing to make her life situation different. She could have kept her money. Instead, it's clear that she loved God dearly – more than life itself. For, she literally put her life in the offering box that day. This is what amazed Jesus. Hers was the proverbial attitude of gratitude, even in the most extreme situation. She was no one's victim, rather a free woman by the grace of God.

One of the greatest things Jesus does for people, rich or poor, is set them free from the sin of Cain, the great sin of self-pity and victimhood. Ministries to the addicted like the Salvation Army, Teen Challenge and the Walter Hoving Home are dedicated to bringing people out of the terrible hole of victimhood and into the light of Jesus Christ.

³ Ibid. pp. 134-135.

For, in our stead, Jesus Himself was the victim of all victims – the innocent Son of God put to death for our sins and crimes. Yet, Jesus never fell prey to victimhood. He knew that by His suffering and death He would emerge resurrected and victorious over sin, death and the power of the devil for our sake.

Therefore, in Christ we are no longer victims, no matter what the world and the devil throw at us. Even when we succumb to temptation, we are no longer victims. For repenting, in Christ we can be forgiven. In Christ we can stand again in Holy Spirit strength.

Jesus said in Mark 8:34-35, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.” The widow probably didn’t know this teaching. But she exemplified it. That’s why Jesus called the attention of His disciples to her.

Now, the gospel record says nothing else about this woman. Perhaps Jesus ordered Judas Iscariot to give her an alm out of the common purse that the disciples carried. We don’t know because the gospel doesn’t say. Therefore, the teaching here is not about helping the poor. Neither is it about giving monetary gifts to God. It does not concern itself with the Marxist doctrine that the poor should be lauded and the rich destroyed.

No. It’s a teaching about the human heart and soul. It’s a teaching about faith in God and relationship to God. When Lord Holy Spirit comes in power bringing to us the gift of God’s Word – Jesus – and the gift to believe Him, only then can we lay down the two copper pennies of our lives before Him as an offering. Only then can we receive the life He gives freely to all who will call upon His Name. Lord do this for us so that You may have us as your own. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV except where noted.