

11 November 2012
Pentecost 24

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Living With a View to the End”

Text: Mark 12:38-44; Hebrews 9:24-28; 1 Kings 17:8-16

(A little allegory thrown in the sermon today . . . always a fun thing to do!)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

With the Festival of the Reformation and the Feast of All Saints now in the rear view mirror of the Church Year, our thoughts are turned these last three Sundays to the end times, the return of Christ, the last days, judgment day . . . or, to use the fancy theological word for it: *eschatology*. Our Church Year takes us from the expectation and promises of a Messiah in Advent, to the days of His birth at Christmas, to the revealing of His divinity in Epiphany, to His suffering and death in Lent, the joy of the resurrection in the Easter season, the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and that same Spirit working now in the life of the Church through the Pentecost season. But now we are at the end, and we look forward to the end, and the return of our Saviour to raise the dead and take us, all who believe and are baptized into in Christ Jesus (Mk 16:16), home. To the rest and pure joy of heaven.

And so (you may be thinking) that focus must start *next* week, because *this* week we didn't hear end times or *eschatology* readings - we heard about a widow and her two mites in the Holy Gospel. Even the hymn we sang about that was put in the “Stewardship” section of the hymnal, not the “End Times” section.

Well that, I respectfully submit, was a mistake - or at least not quite right. Not just because we are at the end of the Church Year and so this reading *should* be about *eschatology*, but because when Jesus **sat down** that day **opposite the treasury and watched people putting money into the offering box**, it was about *eschatology* - because it was the week of the end of His life. This happened on the Tuesday of Holy Week. Just two days before Jesus had entered Jerusalem to the shouts of *Hosanna!* In just two days will be the Lord's Supper, and then His betrayal and arrest. And in just three days - in just around 72 hours - Jesus will bow His head in death and hand over His Spirit. Of all the things Jesus could be doing in His last days on earth, He does this. He sits in the Temple and watches. He sits in the Temple and He sees. Something important.

And so, it seems to me, there is more to this reading than meets the eye. Something

more than just about how much she - and we - put into the offering box or the offering plate. It's about *eschatology*. **It's about how we live this life with a view toward the end.** For, we believe, ever since Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, we are living in the end times, the last days. Once Jesus ascended, He could return at any time, and we don't know when. So how do we live in these days, these *last* days? It's good to take stock of that and consider.

And there are two examples presented to us today: the scribes and the widow. Of the scribes, Jesus says, **beware**. Beware not (this time) of their teaching, but of how they are living. For their lives are all about the here and now. What honor they receive *now*, what glory is bestowed *now*, what advantages they get *now*. There seems to be no mercy or compassion in them, for they even **devour widows' houses**. And their religion is a scam too, Jesus says. Their long prayers are a pretense - something they do to *look* holy, while going after the things of this world.

Perhaps a modern-day comparison with their situation would be with what we are hearing so much about in the news these days: the looming **fiscal cliff**. With concern only for the here and now, with over-spending and over-borrowing and little concern for the deficit and the growing debt, there is a *fiscal cliff* coming - a judgment day, if you will - when these things are going to come due. So it is *spiritually* with the scribes. Their lives are all about the here and now, but there is a judgment day coming - an end to all this. And, Jesus says, **they will receive the greater condemnation**. They're going to fall off that *spiritual* cliff if they continue to live as faithlessly as they are.

But then there is the widow. How utterly different is she. For her the here and now is a hardship. Unlike the scribes, there is no honor for her now, no glory for her now, no advantages for her now. Maybe she still had her house because she was so poor and her house so humble that it wasn't worth the scribes' effort to devour it! And yet what little she had, those **two small copper coins**, she doesn't keep, she doesn't spend on food, she doesn't hold on to for future needs - she drops them into the Temple treasury. They didn't really make a difference. Her offering was like dumping a glass of water into the ocean. Or (to use my *fiscal cliff* example) like me sending in a dollar to the US Treasury - it's not really going to make a difference in paying down the national debt!

But that's not why she did it. She gave those two coins because she was living with a *fundamentally different outlook* than the scribes. Her "here and now" wasn't even worth two small copper coins; but her future was. She did what she did because she was **living her life with a view toward the end**. Others may laugh at her for putting in so little, they *might* come and **devour her house** next, she might not have food the next day or the next week. But her life wasn't in these things. These things were not her utmost concern. For, Jesus said, **she put in everything she had, all her**

life. That's what it really says: **all her life.** She put *her life* into the Temple that day; into the place where God dwells.

As I was thinking about this text, I tried to imagine this widow and what she did. At first, I wondered if she hesitated - even just for a second - before letting go of those two coins. Maybe, maybe just give one - that would still be 50%! Far more than the others. . . . But then, I thought, **no.** This probably wasn't even the first time she did it. It was just the first time somebody noticed. This was perhaps her regular practice. No hesitation at all. Because when you don't live for the here and now, it's easy to let go of the here and now. You don't give out of obligation, like those who put in exactly 10% (and not a penny more!) out of their abundance because they had to, because it was the Law. You give because you're *not* looking at the Law, you're *not* thinking about your obligation, you're *not* worried about your life - for your life is not in the here and now, but in heaven, in God, in the promise of the Messiah who would provide life now and life forever. That's what the eyes of faith look at.

And little did that widow know who was looking at her! Little did that widow know **that Messiah was sitting right there in the Temple that day** *looking at her.* And what she did in faith reminded Him of what He was now about to do. That's why Jesus says she put in **her life** - not just "*all she had to live on,*" as our translation said - but **her life.** That's what Jesus saw because that's what Jesus was now about to do: give *His* life. Lay it down on the altar of the cross. Fill the treasury of heaven *not with gold or silver, but with the forgiveness earned by His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death.* To (as we heard in the verses from Hebrews today) **put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.** Which means that this widow is not first and foremost an example for us, but an example of what Jesus was now going to do **for us.**

And what He is doing for us still, for those two small round copper coins the widow dropped into the treasury that day? Probably the same size as the small round circle of bread dropped into your mouth here - the very **Body** of the one who gave all He had, His whole life, for you. And that second coin He gives to you? Yup, His **Blood**, that you have a treasure that will last beyond this life - the forgiveness, life, and salvation of your Lord. For this truly is for us the flour and oil that never runs out [OT reading], that feed and sustain us . . . until our Lord Jesus comes again **to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.**

For you see, we are widows no more. The sin that estranged us from God and caused us separation from our Lord has been overcome by Jesus. **Baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit** means that we are no longer widows, but now brides awaiting the coming of our Bridegroom. Brides given all the treasures of our Bridegroom - His forgiveness and kingdom and life. And so if we are to live as widows, it is *as widows of the world*, no longer clinging

to the things of this world, no longer looking to this world for our life and value and meaning and purpose, but knowing that we have the One who transcends all that. Who has given us more than all the world can ever give. Like the widow - or, was she really a bride? - in the story today.

And when you live like that - not looking at the Law but looking at the Gospel, not doing your obligation but living in love, not holding on but letting go, not living for the here and now but **living with a view toward the end** - you'll discover that you are far richer than you ever imagined. And you'll live like this widow - not because I stand up here and tell you to - but because your Saviour, who gave all, lives in you. You'll give all you have, all your life, to your spouse, your family, your friends, even those you do not know, and you'll never run out.

But when you don't, when you fall short, when you find yourself hanging on too tightly to the things of this world - because yes, we sinners still sin - take refuge in the fact that your Saviour did not fall short. That He did give His all. That He got up from the Temple that day and **entered the [heavenly] holy place with His own blood** to atone for all your sins - *all of them!* - that as our great High Priest He deal with sin once and for all.

So when you fall short, don't punish yourself or beat yourself up. Instead, come to the holy place where the blood of Jesus is for you, to wash you clean again, to feed and strengthen you, to love you. Repent of your sins and open your ears and mouths and hearts to receive the treasure of His forgiveness. And when the end comes, it will not be a cliff waiting for you to plunge off and swallow you up, but a wedding feast that has no end. A wedding feast of unending joy, with your Bridegroom, your Saviour, forever.

And *that's* a last day to truly look forward to!

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.