

Today's reading takes place on Tuesday of Holy Week, with Jesus' conversations hurtling him toward arrest and execution. He is on the Temple grounds, playing Gotcha with the scholars and, in today's story, having an actual friendly discussion with one scribe. The question about the greatest commandment is sort of an ongoing conversation that rabbis were having, because since there were 613 commandments, it made sense to try to prioritize a few. Also rabbis love arguing about things like this. Jesus' answer is not unique; it had already been said that the greatest commandment was to love God, but he adds that there's a second, which is to love one's neighbor as oneself. The scribe agrees with him and adds, echoing the prophets, that loving God and neighbor is much more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices. Jesus assesses the man as being "not far from the kingdom of God", which is a way of saying that he gets it.

Then Jesus warns against the kinds of religious authority who like to make a big production of their piety, like politicians who like to visit churches and show off how Christian they are. Those politicians apparently never read Mark Twain's story about Captain Stormfield's trip to heaven, where the obscure butcher who'd fed the hungry in secret was a greater celebrity than any number of bishops who arrived at the pearly gates. But I digress. "Beware of the scribes, . . . they devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers." And as if on cue, a poor widow appears to put her two copper coins into the Temple treasury, at which Jesus comments, "This poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. . . . She out of her poverty has put in everything she had."

As I've said before, I don't think Jesus is praising the woman. The context is

clearly his disapproval of what the Temple has become, an instrument of self-aggrandizement and profit for insiders. The Temple had hundreds of employees, and in a sense Jerusalem was a “company town.” The Temple operated as a central bank and treasury.

Moreover, Temple priests and scribes lived very well. The priestly clan had not been given land, because they wouldn’t have time to farm it, and the other tribes of Israel were obligated to provide them with a living through payments to the Temple. So priests and scribes got a cut of every sacrifice and a five-shekel tax on every first-born child. Some of them became so wealthy that they went into money-lending as a sideline, which meant that if the debt was not paid, they were in a position to foreclose on the debtor. They *did* devour widows’ houses. The widow’s tiny gift to the Temple is a silent indictment of the whole system: she is as poor as she is because the religious authorities have not been doing their job, which is to take care of the widow, the orphan and the alien.

So Jesus sees the widow as, in a sense, a prophet, carrying on the tradition of critiquing those in power who abdicate their responsibility to the community, even if she is not consciously making the critique. But even more interesting, Jesus notices her at all.

Even now, older women are strangely invisible. As I get older, I hear people close to my age beginning to comment on being ignored more, and I recognize the phenomenon myself. Elderly ladies are almost invisible. Here’s this widow surrounded by bustle and important people in a public place; probably nobody takes any notice of her. But Jesus does, because he sees in God’s countercultural

way, in which the last are first and the unimportant are important. Jesus *sees* because he loves—the greatest commandment.

Richard Rohr says that you can't understand the Bible unless you have studied what he calls "the first Bible," which is Creation—God's revelation of love that predates the textual revelations. Actually, what he says is "Don't dare put the second Bible in the hands of people who have not sat lovingly at the feet of the first Bible [creation]." I thought of that when I listened recently to Krista Tippett interview Robin Wall Kimmerer, who is a professor of environmental biology at the State University of New York and also a Native American. Kimmerer writes, "Science polishes the gift of **seeing**, indigenous traditions work with gifts of listening and language." She entered the forestry school of SUNY as a freshman wanting to study botany because she wanted to know why asters and goldenrod look so beautiful together. She was told that this was not a science question but an art question, which was demoralizing, but as she continued to study, she learned that "there's a very good biophysical explanation for why those plants grow together, so it's a matter of aesthetics and it's a matter of ecology. Those complimentary colors of purple and gold together, being opposites on the color wheel, they're so vivid, they actually attract far more pollinators than if those two grew apart from one another." She learned the protocols of science, that scientists analyze things as if they were pure material rather than material and spirit together. But at a gathering of traditional indigenous elders, "plant knowledge holders," she remembered how she had had both a scientific and a spiritual curiosity about plants. She says, "I . . . sat there and soaked in this wonderful conversation, which

interwove mythic knowledge and scientific knowledge into this beautiful cultural, natural history. . . . it made me remember those things that starting to walk the science path had made me forget, . . . And I just saw that their knowledge was so much more whole and rich and nurturing that I wanted to do everything that I could to bring those ways of knowing back into harmony.”¹

Kimmerer says that science asks us to learn about things, and traditional knowledge asks us to learn *from* things. So as a botanist she has learned about and from mosses. What do mosses teach? Forgive the long quotation here:

In their simplicity, in the power of being small, mosses become so successful all over the world because they live in these tiny little layers on rocks, on logs, and on trees. They work with the natural forces that lie over every little surface of the world, and to me, they’re exemplars of not only surviving, but flourishing by working with natural processes. Mosses are superb teachers about living within your means.

The way that they do this really brings into question the whole premise that competition is what really structures biological evolution and biological success. Because mosses are not good competitors at all, and yet they are the oldest plants on the planet. They have persisted here for 350 million years. They ought to be doing something right here. And one of those somethings, I think, has to do with their ability to cooperate with one another, to share the limited resources that they have, to really give more than they take. Mosses build soil, they purify water, they are like the coral reefs of the forest, they make homes for this myriad of all these very cool little invertebrates who live in there. They are just engines of biodiversity. They do all of these things, and yet, they’re only a centimeter tall.

Mosses could teach us how to live on this earth richly without being so damaging to the earth. The fact that they succeed not by competing but by cooperating, in a very literal way, undermines one of our dominant models for survival, doesn’t it? Yet you learn this by inquiring appreciatively of the moss, by

¹ http://www.onbeing.org/program/robin-wall-kimmerer-the-intelligence-in-all-kinds-of-life/transcript/8467#main_content

taking notice of what is small and insignificant, like poor widows, like wildflowers. If we could read the first Bible, the natural world, in this careful and reverent way, we would understand why the second Bible tells us that the greatest commandment is to love God and to love neighbor. We may need to learn from the moss in order to survive on this planet.

On the day that I wrote this sermon, I also read an article about St. Mary's Cathedral in San Francisco that installed a sprinkler system to keep homeless people from sleeping in the doorways. For two years, every 30 to 60 minutes water sprayed from the top of the doorway so that anybody or anything there got soaked. Eventually about a year ago the media caught on and the practice was stopped, but obviously the damage had been done. The optics, as they say, were bad.

God, who is love, favors the small and insignificant. It's very counterintuitive, but that seems to be the logic of the Kingdom. Insofar as the church and Christians can appropriate that wisdom, we are not far from the Kingdom of God.

Let us pray.

Holy One, help us to see as you see, so that we notice what speaks of you and of love. Bless our species to become more attuned to the teachings of your creation. Amen.