

PROTECT THE VULNERABLE AND SPEAK THE TRUTH
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Psalm 146

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul!
I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.
When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God,
who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever;
who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoners free;
the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the
righteous.

The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he
brings to ruin.

The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the Lord!

Mark 12:38-44

As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "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."

I was planning to give another stewardship sermon today. In fact, I had already started writing it. But then I woke up on Wednesday morning, and I heard the news about the election, and somehow stewardship didn't seem like the most pressing issue anymore.

So, I feel like I should say something about this moment we're in because that's what everyone's thinking about right now. But I don't

know what it means. I'm not an expert on politics. And I certainly don't know what's going to happen. And that's what worries me: I don't think anyone does.

I read an opinion piece the other day by Patrick Healy and David French. The title was, "It's Time to Admit America Has Changed." I think they're right. I think America has changed. It feels like we're in uncharted waters. It feels like

we're on a path we've never been on before. And whether you see that as a good thing or not, what worries me is that I don't think anyone knows where this path is going to take us. And I don't think anyone will know until we get there.

I mean, every time there's a new administration, there are going to be changes. But I'm 54 years old, and I've been through a lot of elections, some that have gone my way, some that haven't, and this one feels different. Even back in 2016, I thought, "Well, we've swung pretty far to the right, but eventually we'll swing back because that's how our political system works. You win some, you lose some, and ultimately that's for the good. In the long run, it keeps us somewhere in the middle.

But I'm not sure that's how it works anymore. When I look at how deep the divisions are in this country, when I hear some of the rhetoric being thrown around and how de-humanizing it is, when I read that more and more Americans see political violence as justified, I think politics has become a zero-sum game. It's not win some/lose some anymore. It's now winner-take-all.

So I've been trying to just breathe my way through this time of uncertainty—and I mean that literally. When I go to bed at night, I put my earbuds in, I close my eyes, and I listen to a podcast with breathing exercises. I highly recommend it. It's very calming.

But more importantly than that, I'm trying to stay grounded in my faith. Because no matter what's happening in the world, no matter how confusing things get, Jesus always shows us the right path. And I think David French, in that opinion piece, did a nice job of summing up what that path consists of. He was talking about what's weighing on his mind right now, as he looks beyond the election, and he said, "I was speaking at a college a few days ago and someone asked, 'What will be your mindset if Donald Trump wins?' And I think of it as having two real components: Protect the vulnerable and speak the truth."

I think that's a great way of encapsulating what Jesus' ministry was about. He protected the vulnerable, and he spoke the truth. He protected

the people in his day who couldn't protect themselves. He stood up for the people in his day who were being abused and exploited. And he spoke the truth to the people in his day who were doing the abusing and exploiting. He told them it was wrong in God's eyes, and he publicly condemned them for it.

And if that's what his ministry was about—or at least a big chunk of it—then that's what our ministry needs to be about—or at least a big chunk of it. That's the path we need to follow as Christians—the path of compassion and mercy and justice.

And let me stop right here and make something very clear. I'm not saying that God is on the side one party or the other today. I'm not saying that if he was here right now, Jesus would be a Democrat or a Republican. I'm saying that from what I hear in passages like the psalm reading today, God is on the side of the weak and the downtrodden, whoever they might be. God executes justice for the oppressed, the psalmist says. God gives food to the hungry. God watches over the strangers. God upholds the orphan and the widow. And I'm saying that from what I hear in passages like the gospel reading today, Jesus stands against ANY political system that privileges some people over others; ANY political system where the haves take from the have-nots.

The story of the widow who puts her last two coins into the treasury isn't just a condemnation of a few individual scribes who like to walk around in fancy clothes and have people come up and flatter them. It's a condemnation of the whole temple system they support.

One of the things Mark mentions about them is that they like to have the "best seats in the synagogues." But that doesn't mean the seats in the front row. That doesn't mean the seats with the best view. Scribes were highly educated public officials, and they handled all sorts of matters—legal matters, financial matters, political matters. So, they had a lot of power, and eventually they gained so much power that they became the interpreters of the law, and that's what it meant to have the best seats in the synagogues. It meant being the one who had the

authority to interpret scripture. It meant being the one who got to tell everyone else in your community, "This is what the law means, and this is how you're going to follow it."

Clearly that kind of power is easy to abuse, which is apparently what often happened. If this story is any indicator, scribes in Jesus' day often used the best seats to promote their personal agendas and maintain a temple system that benefitted the people at the top at the expense of the people at the bottom.

That's the system that convinces the widow that being faithful means giving everything she has to live on. That's the system that takes her last two pennies and leaves her with nothing. And that's the system Jesus is calling out when he says, "they devour widows' houses."

So I guess what all of this comes down to is: I'm worried. I'm worried about people who are vulnerable right now. I'm worried about immigrants, who are just trying to build a better life for themselves, and now they're terrified that they're going to be deported, and their families are going to be split up. I'm worried about the LGBTQ community—that their rights might be taken away, and they might have to go back to hiding who they are. I'm worried about communities of color—that their voices are going to be suppressed, and their histories are going to be erased, and they're going to be pushed even further toward the margins. I'm worried about protestors and activists and anyone who raises their voice against a president who has talked a lot about retribution and sees his opponents as enemies.

But who knows, maybe all these worries are overblown. Maybe I'm overreacting, and everything's going to be fine. Maybe this new path we're on really is going to take us someplace great. We'll just have to wait and see.

There is one thing that's clear, however. As Christians, we need to keep our eyes on the path that Jesus showed us. We need to keep our eyes on the path of compassion and mercy and justice. And that means we need to protect the vulnerable and speak the truth—no matter who's in office, no matter what party is in power. We

need to live our faith today, tomorrow, and always. Amen.