

This passage is referred to as the Widow's Mite. Many see this as a story about generosity, as a model for stewardship. If you just read the last 4 verses you might think so, too. But if we read the whole thing, we realize that Jesus is contrasting the temple Pharisees- the crème de la crème of Pharisees – with this poor widow. And he's angry.

The temple Pharisees wear beautiful robes and stoles. They pace around before the less holy and say long and pious prayers. Well-to-do people support them with lavish gifts believing they are pleasing God. Jesus sits watching this, and he's angry.

He knows God and that no special vestments nor stately buildings are needed to bring you closer to God. Beyond the Pharisee's dress and prayers, the lavish and deliberately mysterious Temple, Jesus is angry knowing that all this is supported by the small contributions of those with scant means. Widows particularly fall into this category because once they are without a man the Pharisees and other temple workers manage their assets. For a fee. So, Jesus sits there watching the Pharisees and seeing rich people ostentatiously put large sums in the offering; he sees the temple Pharisees in their robes and hears their prayers. And then he observes a ragged widow drop her last two pennies into the offering. He gathers the disciples and says: look she's given all she has to live on. And he's angry.

Many stewardship sermons have taken Jesus' statement to be one of admiration; that's the conventional wisdom on this text, but if we read it carefully we see the connection between the splendor of the Pharisees and the destitution of this widow not as a recommendation but as a condemnation.

Look what she is doing, Jesus says, she is giving all she has to live on so all this frippery can continue. The poor, those who sit at the very back of the temple if they are allowed in at all, they are the ones who give regularly, whose two pennies are proportionately so much more than the gifts of the rich. Is this what God desires? This, Jesus knows, is not right. Those in power are living off the accumulation of many small contributions from people for whom it is a sacrifice. The small contributors have no idea how their money is used. It was like that then, it is like that now.

I have been going back and forth about including Veteran's day in my sermon. I can't seem to stop myself – not Veteran's day so much as Armistice Day, surely a concept much more suitable to this setting. Of course, the cessation of hostilities at the end of The War to End All War should be celebrated. Armistice. The Great War, the war to make the world safe for democracy is over so there is much to celebrate. No more war. No need to honor other war veterans to come – there will be none.

The Great War began – well let's see, what were you taught? Right at the assassination of a minor emperor and his wife by an anarchist. All dressed up in uniform and finery, they traveled around Sarajevo in an open coach, against advice.

Fighting didn't immediately break out, but planning began. Again clothing was important; the Kaiser was focused on the uniform his armies would wear. He loved pageantry. The British liked pageantry too – but they were more concerned with hierarchy. Men from the upper classes were automatically made officers and often proved incompetent costing the lives of their men.

The Royal Houses of most of Europe were drawn into the war through alliances – often involving cousins, siblings or grandchildren. Most of European Royalty were related through Queen Victoria. There was lots of strutting in uniforms and pronouncements not unlike the robes and prayers of the Pharisees.

The widow who gave all she could to support the temple was not unlike the young men eager to join up and fight for King and Country. Having been told by their "betters" of the justness of the cause – temple or battlefield – they each responded with remarkable loyalty and trust. As Jesus grew angry watching the widow give her last few coins; we can imagine him at the prayers and blessings that launch teenagers into battle.

It wasn't that long ago that I heard words between nuclear powers which sounded like a game of chicken and wondered if we would be the next helpless victims.

I struggled as to whether to address this or not, today being Veteran's Day. And I realized that I had veterans and war intermingled. Working toward and wanting peace is not unpatriotic. We are here in this temple and maybe Jesus would be angry at our trappings of ecclesiastical stuff. But it is my fervent and unshakable belief that Jesus does not want war; that we are here to learn to talk without rancor and to listen without judgement. We give thanks for those who fought so that we can have our 'way' of life; but the most authentic thing we can do in remembrance, to honor those names listed at the back of the room – those who died in..... - is to do everything we can to stop it happening again.

But peace is so much harder than war. Understanding and compromising is an inch by inch campaign. It is so much easier to plan and produce and plot. I am not saying that war is easy, that the sacrifices of war are negligible, that we have not fought in some honorable causes. War is complicated and costly but when I say war is easier than peace, I refer to the simplicity of deciding to annihilate an enemy; the labelling of another culture, country, civilization as

an enemy. When someone is an enemy we don't need to question - the right thing is to destroy them. Destruction is so much easier than construction - both in tangible terms and in relationships. It is easier to write off a friend than to try to work out our differences.

I know, I hear you, peace with Isis, with those who want only to destroy or convert us - how naive! I hear that voice, maybe it is in my own head. But when we think about the resources that go into war, what would it be like if we put that energy into peace.

All the European participants in the Great War knew it was coming and spent years planning and preparing. At least 4 years went into the Germans plans to take France through Belgium - like a wind up toy against a wall - they end up mired in the inch by inch pace that makes peace so hard to work for.

Wait a minute, I'm hearing your voices again - why are you telling us this, we are the little people. We are at the mercy of leaders and egos we cannot affect. But that is the only way peace will become a priority - if people sitting in pews or kneeling on carpets in faith make it so. Maybe we've just made a step in that direction with a new generation and a new demographic in Congress. I don't know.

In the end it is always the people and our God - it is never the bombs or the fighter jets - it is the people who launch them. It is always the people and our God - it is never the magnificence of the building or the elegance of the vestments. It is the widow who can build one penny at a time; it is the neighbor listening to stories of a refugee journey or sharing a traditional meal.

Peace is hard - but the equipment is inexpensive and we are already at work - sitting vigil with Shir Tikvah, walking outside detention centers, praying together.

100 years ago - almost precisely - when you hear our bell being rung 11 times at 11:00 - it will be precisely - 100 years ago we lay down our arms thinking we would never have to pick them up again. Yet we've spent a good deal of that time arming - can you imagine if we'd put that time, those resources, that energy into peace what it would look like now? No, neither can I but let's not be in that same place 100 years from now.