

## **“From Jerusalem to Ogden, Utah” Sermon on Sunday, November 11, 2018**

Based on Mark 12: 38-44

Yesterday a week ago someone died almost seven thousand miles away - and it matters to us today. This murder occurred in the shadow of the shooting in Pittsburgh – a landmark crime, which resonated with people all across our country and encouraged solidarity among the diverse religious people in our community. As a result, we stand with our Jewish brothers and sisters against hatred, violence and intolerance, and against all the ugly expressions of small-mindedness that we have all heard and endured in recent times. It’s been frankly too much and we need to show the world who we are. One of Paul’s favorite expressions was: we are children of the light, not of the darkness. Let’s remember that. Let’s claim that.

Yet, the incident I’m referring to was different. It did not happen in a place of worship. It did not happen in our country. It took place 7,000 long miles away and yet, it is resonating with me today, and I hope also with you.

He was still a young man, in his late 30’s, a father of seven children, the youngest member of the household a tender eleven months old baby. He was a respected leader in his community, the mayor of a small town in the American West, in a state where church and community still overlap more than in most places. He was a long-time member of the local council. When home, he worshipped regularly in the Mormon Temple. And he had served in the National Guard for more than a decade, including seven years on active duty. Twice he had been deployed to Iraq and once to Afghanistan. You could say without any hint of exaggeration that he was dedicated to his country and his community, for sure.

Last year, people in his home town tried to persuade him from going on a fourth tour of duty, saying, “You have done enough. You have done your part. Stay home!” I imagine they also said this to him: “Don’t be stupid! You have a wife and seven children. They need you!” But despite the fact that Brent Taylor loved his family and loved his community and loved his own life, he would not be deterred from answering the call to duty yet another time. It wasn’t cowboy mentality that led him to those decisions, but rather the belief that he could make a difference somewhere in the world. When he left for Afghanistan, he received a police escort in his home town of Ogden, Utah. Hundreds of residents lined the streets to bid him farewell. What they didn’t know: they wouldn’t see him again.

On Saturday, November 3, Brent Taylor, was killed in an insider attack after a member of the Afghan security forces opened fire at a base in Kabul where foreign troops provide training to Afghan forces. The attack wounded another U.S. service member. The person who opened fire on Taylor was killed immediately, which was no consolation whatsoever. His life was taken, leaving a beautiful mark in his community and setting the bar so high that few of us could reach it. What a loss!

Now you might say, this is a good story for Veterans Day. Nice pick, pastor! This is American service, volunteerism and patriotism all wrapped in one. And who could argue that? But actually, I was reminded of this larger-than-life role model as I read and contemplated the gospel passage for this Sunday, which is weird. On the surface, National Guard Member Brent Taylor, the hero

from Ogden, Utah, could not be any more different from the poor widow Jesus points out as an example in today's reading. Here is a man who has achieved every success, and received every respect and accolade in his community even before he was killed on his last tour of duty. On the other hand, we are introduced to a woman who was destitute, needy, probably an annoyance to many, and dependent on charity. But I tell you, these two characters who are so very different in terms of gender, economics, image, standing in the community and what not, they do have something important in common. See, I wouldn't be surprised if members of the Jerusalem community had tried to persuade this woman to stop giving for God's sake, just like people in Ogden approached Mayor Taylor, imploring him to call it quits. In the case of the widow, they may have said "Don't put anything into the Temple treasury. Think of yourself first! Don't give your last penny away! Don't be stupid!" In both cases we have individuals who are willing to give... and give... and give, beyond what most people would call wise, prudent or rational. They just have that DNA of giving. Some people do!

And others take advantage of it!!!

That is of course in part the criticism that Jesus levels at the people who are listening here, which happens to include his audience at St. Peter's Lutheran Church on North Wales on the 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost in the year of the Lord, 2018. Someone has said, "There are two kinds of people – givers and takers." If that is true, and it is of course a gross over-simplification of things, which kind of person are you?

This is the question that goes to the ethical heart of religion, the law of God, if you will. Are you a giver or a taker? Let me describe a giver to you. We have this nurse who comes to our home every Friday morning to deliver immuno-globulin therapy to Sam. We take the medicine out of the fridge an hour earlier and she goes to work. It's her job, right? Well, I can tell you, there is never a Friday morning when she doesn't come with something special for Sam – gluten free pizza, donuts, sandwiches, always based on what he likes, always done with love and thoughtfulness. It's not something her company pays for. It's something she wants to do, and something she simply does out of the goodness of her heart. It's who she is. She is a giver.

Religion quite simply encourages us to be givers. There is no doubt about that. It's who we are as people of God. Find ways to give back to God, to your community, find ways to be charitable... Giving and generosity are not restricted to religious people of course, but it is also no accident that giving tends to be higher in communities of faith, according to credible surveys. That's who we are, right? That's who Mayor Brent Taylor was. That's who this unknown widow of Jesus' time was. That's who Joan Elton, Sam's nurse, is. A giver. (Please also know, I don't want to discourage folks who really could use some help from asking for it or accepting it. That can be a problem too, especially among "giving" church folks. But that's a sermon for another day.)

For today, let us rejoice in the examples set before us and let us find ways to be giving and generous in our own lives, in all the ways we can. Because it is the best expression we can give of our freedom and salvation in Jesus Christ, who by the way "only" gave his life for us.

Cause he was a giver!

**Amen.**