

# North Kildonan United Church

7<sup>th</sup> November 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

*Psalm 121*

*Mark 12: 38-44*

*Gracious God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.*

We just heard Betty read today's gospel from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, our regular translation. And we may be familiar with this passage, especially with the description of the poor widow depositing all she had into the Temple treasury, an offering sometimes called the "*Widow's Mite*." That term comes from the King James Version of this passage, which says in part: "*And there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing.*"

So, how much are two mites, or two small copper coins, which together equal a penny? Well, according to one source, a mite or a small copper coin, was worth 1/64<sup>th</sup> of a labourer's daily wage, not very much indeed.

Let's picture the scene in today's gospel. Jesus and the disciples are now in Jerusalem. In chapter 11, the gospel writer describes Jesus entering Jerusalem on a colt, as people hail him with palm branches and shout out "*Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!*" We know this as Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week. We are now in the final days of Jesus's earthly life, and he spends his time in final instruction to his followers.

His instruction continues in chapter 12, beginning with the parable of the Wicked Tenants, followed by some Pharisees trying to trip Jesus up on a question of to whom do faithful people pay loyalty. They couch it in terms of paying taxes, a topic that always gets people's attention. Jesus takes a Roman coin and asks his questioners whose image is on the coin. They tell him it's the emperor, to which Jesus responds, "*Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.*"

The chapter continues with a question about the Resurrection, then in answer to another question Jesus lays out the two great commandments: "*Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. You shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.*"

Now we are at today's reading, as we stand with the crowd in the Temple, listening to Jesus teach. Tom Wright translates the passage this way.

*"Beware of the lawyers! They like to walk about in long robes, and to be greeted in the market-places. They take the chief seats in the synagogue, and the best places at dinner parties. They devour the property of widows, and make long prayers without sincerity. They will receive all the more condemnation."*

As Jesus sat opposite the Temple treasury, he watched the crowd putting money into the alms boxes. Lots of rich people put in substantial amounts. Then there came a single poor widow, who put in two tiny coins, together worth a single penny.

Jesus called his disciples. *“I’m telling you the truth. This poor widow just put more into the treasury than everybody else. You see, all the others were contributing out of their wealth; but she put in everything she had, out of her poverty. It was her whole livelihood.”*

A word of caution is advised at this point. Let’s be clear. Jesus is not writing off all lawyers as crooks, but he is condemning those in all professions who cheat and steal and betray the trust of the vulnerable; the widow, the orphan, the resident alien, the refugee. And in so doing Jesus is firmly in the Jewish tradition of standing with those in need, of being compassionate and caring, of not robbing the poor because they are poor, or illiterate, or vulnerable, or homeless, or a stranger. The Jewish tradition quoted earlier in the chapter: *“you shall love your neighbour as yourself”*, which infuses all of Christ’s teachings.

So we have two parties, if you will, in today’s reading. The rich who make a great show of the generosity of their offering and the poor widow who gives all that she has and is left with nothing

William O’Malley makes an interesting point about the Temple offering. He says: *“The Jerusalem temple was, in fact, also a bank-as were Roman temples. But also around the two huge porticoes on either side of the temple itself were thirteen trumpet-shaped collection boxes. Larger coins would of course make more noise going in.... the woman was dressed in obviously poor clothing and her tiny coins make only a little tinkle in the receptacle.”*

The widow’s sacrifice, though seemingly small in comparison to those who can afford to give plenty to the Temple treasury, is a complete and total sacrifice, her self-giving of everything she has. Very soon, as the story in Mark’s gospel unfolds, we discover that Jesus, like the poor widow, will give his life as a sacrifice for all. A sacrifice that means life and hope for all.

On this Remembrance Sunday, I want to share with you once again this summary of Jewish ethics as presented by the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Ethics and ethical behaviour are ways of living out our love of our neighbour, and the wisdom Rabbi Sacks offers is worth hearing as we wrestle with the causes and attitudes which lead to war and violence.

First, an introduction. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks was the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, the author of many books and commentaries, and the presenter on several YouTube programmes. Part of the appeal with Rabbi Sacks was his broad understanding of religion. As a boy he attended Christian schools and he clearly valued Christianity. Growing up in England, he appreciated the Anglican middle way, which allows for differences of opinion and thought. Sadly, Rabbi Sacks died a year ago today, 7<sup>th</sup>

November, 2020, a tremendous loss to both the Jewish community and to the broader Christian and religious community. *May his memory be a blessing.*

So, on this day of remembrance and rededication, as we explore the role of ethics and ethical behaviour in creating peaceful living, let us hear the wisdom of these seven features of Jewish ethics as presented by Rabbi Sacks.

The first is **Human Dignity**. Though science may say we share 98% of our genes with the primates, humans are not animals. We are created in the image of God and precious. In Jewish thought, when a person destroys a life, it is as if he or she has destroyed a universe. When a person saves a life, it is as if that person has saved a universe. Each of us is different, unique, and cherished, made in the image of God. And as such, each of us has the right to life, the gift of our Creator.

**Human Freedom.** Each human being is free to choose how they will live their life, if they will make choices that lead to fullness of life or death, and our fate, if you will, is determined by our choices. We are moral agents, accountable and responsible for our actions. That involves self-discipline, which we learn within a strong and loving family, in other words a shared moral code that directs daily living. Respect, kindness, care for others don't just happen, they are learned within the family.

**The Sanctity of Life.** The Torah is a protest against the use of violence to attain human ends, writes Rabbi Sacks. The human drama can be summed up this way. God is free. God created order. God gives humans freedom. Humans create chaos. Can freedom and order coexist? Rabbi Sacks writes: *"Morality is that shared system of self-imposed restraints that allow my freedom to coexist with yours."*

The alternative to morality is violence. And violence is the imposition by force of my will on the world. Basically it's *"I want what you have and if you don't hand it over I will hurt you."* Taken on a national scale, what better description of war is there.

**Guilt, not Shame.** A distinction is made between shame, which has to do with honour and what people see, and guilt, which is something we experience within us. To be shamed is to be marked, declared to be a bad person, written off as damaged goods. Think of the Hollywood sex scandals that happen every so often. Those accused are often shamed to the point of losing their livelihoods, relationships and positions in society. Trial by media is how it's described.

*"You'll never work in this town again"* is the language of shame. Which means that the only way to escape shame is to hide or leave and try to start over somewhere far away, or at the worst, to take one's own life. There is little to no room for confession, repentance, forgiveness and rehabilitation in a shame society. Shame destroys.

But guilt is based not on what is seen but what a person feels within. It is our conscience convicting us, and as such there is room to change and restore. There is a freedom to begin again with guilt that is not there with shame. Guilt can energize a person to begin over again.

For example, the story of Adam and Eve is all about shame, not guilt. It's only when they realize how others might see them that they feel shame for their nakedness. Judaism and Christianity are religions of guilt more than shame. That guilt is our inner voice convicting us to change our ways, making confession and seeking forgiveness and beginning again.

**Loyalty and Love.** The command to love God with all your heart, soul and might and to love your neighbour as yourself, and to love the stranger because you know what it's like to be a stranger, is a core ethic of Judaism and Christianity. This is more than a principle of justice, more than a golden rule of doing to others what you would have done to you. The command is to love, which is much more demanding than just not causing harm.

That command to love is rooted in the sanctity of marriage and solid family life, and Rabbi Sacks makes the point that the children of broken homes are the ones who are now suffering substance abuse and other syndromes and disorders. And that's just the beginning of the problems.

**The Ethics of Covenant.** What does it mean to be in a covenantal relationship, say for instance in our neighbourhood. There was a time when we knew everyone on our street, and that knowledge helped shape our sense of what it meant to live in North Kildonan, or the West End, or St James or wherever. We were all part of the neighbourhood, all in it together, and often children from one household were welcome at the neighbours, till mom phoned to say it was time for supper. But the spirit of individualism that is common nowadays means that we often don't know who our neighbour is, and as such we don't feel connected to our neighbourhood. And when we need help, we don't know who to call upon.

**The Dual Covenant.** Through Noah, all people on earth are in covenant with God, but through the covenant made at Sinai, when Moses received the tablets of the Ten Commandments, Judaism, and I would add Christianity, entered into a specific covenant with God.

With the Noah covenant, the rainbow promise that God would never again destroy the earth, the implication is that even in time of war, there are those things which are morally impermissible because our opponents are still human and possess inalienable rights. When a soldier is taken prisoner, he or she is out of the battle and is not be killed. This is a classic understanding of war. But that understanding was completely abandoned during the Holocaust and not just then but how many other times.

These ethics are worth pondering, especially this day as we consider the causes of war and violence and unrest.

Ultimately, the people were not able to fully serve the Lord so they, and we, rely on God's love and faith in us. Jesus and St Paul certainly affirmed the conviction that it is God's love for us that carries us, God's faith in us that sustains us. Ethics and morality

direct us in our way through life, shaping us in the way we should go. Let's end with these words from Reinhold Niebuhr, the great theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*“Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we must be saved by love.*

*No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.” Amen.*