

## “Pack It Up: Connecting Flights”

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Mark 12.38-44

Psalm 25.5-10

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Welcome back to the First Presbyterian Travel Agency in which we are planning our trip through 2022, exploring our gifts and celebrating the assets we have as a congregation. If you're just joining us, this is our third week discussing stewardship – not only our finances, but the ways in which we offer our time and talents and energy in ministry. Each week we pack something new. The first week I packed snacks, representing the food ministries here. The second week I packed a ball of yarn signifying our traveling companions, those within the congregation with whom we take this journey. Today we're discussing the travelers around us. Similar to traveling companions, they are often those who go on the journey with us, but they aren't in the car seat next to us – they're often strangers, or people that we meet along the way to our destination.

When I travel in airports I have found that I have a large, flashing neon sign that seems to say, “Pastor here! Come talk!” There have been times I've tried to sort of hide in a book, but I've learned to embrace this interesting gift. When people find out I'm a minister they either want to argue religion with me, or tell me their entire faith journey – and both are gifts that I have come to appreciate. Sometimes when people travel parallel to us, our journeys will never cross. Sometimes they intersect, and we have the opportunity to decide how we will respond.

The traveling companions I am describing in our journey are community members and Alma College. No ministry happens in a vacuum, and there have been times, and will be more times, in which we have chances to do ministry with others. We have one such opportunity now as we establish this new partnership with the college. We won't do everything together, but there will be times we will be on the same flight, if I can continue the metaphor. There will be times that it makes sense for us to work together in ministry. These are all opportunities for us to grow together.

To partner with is important. Too often in Christian history Christians have ministered to rather than with, which often has meant that voices have been silenced, assumptions have been made, and that important wisdom and words have been missed. Collaborations can be hard because it means acknowledging that we don't have all the answers. It means recognizing that there might be more than one “right” answer or way. It can also be challenging to navigate different personalities or means of doing something or learning processes. And, it is also deeply rewarding to work together from our different places in the journey.

I think part of the struggle with working with those in different parts of the journey can come from the broken systems with which we live and work within. One of the broken systems with which we work is being lifted up in the country today, and in our scripture passage for

today. In the Gospel reading we hear Jesus talking about hypocrites – especially religious leaders who loved to make a huge show of their faithfulness but oppressed others in doing so.

There have been times when people have seen the widow giving the entirety of her tiny bank account as a celebration. Some have figured that this is the standard for giving – that we should give and give until we have nothing left. Yet, I think that while some scripture passages are prescriptive – suggesting how we should act, this one is how we should not act as a society. Here we see those with all the privilege, with the money, sitting in the seat of power, watching this woman give until it literally hurts. Dr. Charles Campbell names this “economic violence.”<sup>1</sup> It is taking advantage of those who are already at a disadvantage in our society.

As I traveled to Indiana this week to gather with minister colleagues, we searched for some places to eat. Our typical eatery was closed due to a lack of staff. The place we landed on was struggling. Our waitress was also the chef. Our country is going through a shortage of different products. Part of that is lack of staffing, part of that is because the demand is incredibly high in our country. Part of the delay in the reopening of the college Chapel was because there were parts that were not delivered at the time it was expected because there was a trucker strike.

We are at a pivotal time in our country. I think it is important to realize that the inconvenience of a restaurant being closed because of a lack of staff or an item not being delivered because of a strike is indicative of a deeper, more important problem. Capitalism is stalling because the oppressed continue to be oppressed. Workers are on strike and are leaving their positions, forcing the hands of business owners because they simply are not paid enough. If this widow were here today, instead of emptying her pocket, she might be standing in the worker strike with others. Though, I certainly don't want to take away from the widow's experience in this passage. We don't know how she stood up to the powers of her time – and perhaps we just don't see it mentioned here.

Our financial system is exploitative. It rewards those who have privilege, who sit in the seats like those religious leaders, and it exploits those who, like the widow, cannot find their way out of the cycle of power, no matter how hard they work. If you remember back to last week's passage, we met Ruth and Naomi, who were childless widows. In that time women were reliant on their husbands or sons for financial stability. It wouldn't have mattered if they had a job in that time – no job would have paid them the same as a man, so they never would have had the same equity. It wouldn't have mattered if they had worked twice as hard – they still wouldn't have had the same financial stability. The same is true for people who find themselves in the cycles of poverty within our own society, in which people of color are affected by this more so than white people. This helps us to recognize the privilege that we have, going back to our privilege exercise, to realize that we can change the system to be more equitable. We can make changes so that the widow isn't putting in her last bit while the religious leaders are rolling in the dough.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles L. Campbell, *The Word before the Powers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 83, as referenced by Rodger Nishioka in *Feasting on the Word* commentary.

Again, this passage isn't to name us as the widow or as the religious leaders. It is to know that in our journey with community, in our journey with people who will come and go throughout time, we will meet the widows, the economically insecure, and we must make sure we are not the religious leaders who continue to exploit – which I do not see you all doing. And that when we meet the leaders who continue to take and oppress, that we remember the widows, that we remember those who have been exploited, and stand with them to make a change.

We have used the Psalm 25 scripture throughout our travels. We are reminded that we will make missteps in our journeys, but that God loves us and redeems us. As we begin our new journey in 2022, we know we won't do everything perfectly. Sometimes we will make mistakes, and that's ok. What I think is most important is that we keep trying, we keep our focus on God, and we keep listening to one another and the community. The leaders in the Mark passage had stopped listening – they saw themselves as accountable to no one and could not see that the widow was giving everything – not supported by anyone, and not given a chance to succeed.

As we stand in this momentous time in our country, I hope that the church – big church, Christian church – can see the injustices and speak for equity. Not only do we step in to try to fill in the gaps but also to make changes so that there aren't gaps at all. Again, this journey isn't always easy. It may not be the tropical cruise or the mountain adventure, but it is the journey for which we are called – for which we have been given the deep hearts to love people and do God's good work.

As you consider how you will contribute to our 2022 journey, think about what gifts you have, and can it connect us to the community? We've packed our snacks, our yarn, and today I put in an Alma College travel mug – reminding us that we are always on the go in ministry, so we must not hesitate in one space long, but be willing to listen to the Spirit, and to the community. Thanks be to God. Amen.