

**SERMON**  
**“Plugged Up Justice”**  
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**St. John’s Chapel UCC**

**Amos 5: 21-24**

**Mark 12: 38-44**

As [Jesus] taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplace, 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 treasure 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.

## SERMON

According to Marjorie Suchocki, a well-known theologian, the amazing aspect of the Hebrew people was that when they encountered drastic conditions of catastrophe, they never doubted their God. When many of us face catastrophe, heartache, sickness, we ask, “How could God allow this to happen?” We feel like God has let us down or deserted us.

Not the Hebrews! When they encountered bad times they doubted themselves, not God. Unlike people of surrounding nations who assumed that their god, Baal, had journeyed to the underworld and thus left them, the Hebrew people connected their well-being and the well-being of the earth with their own conformity to justice. When they were not just, the world was not just. They had an old proverb that in the foundation of the earth, God had first established the water under the earth, and these waters were the waters of **pure righteousness, pure justice**—flowing like a clear flowing stream. Hence the prophet Amos says, “Let justice roll down like a river, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

This stream, this foundation of water under the earth, continually flowed throughout all the land. Only one thing could stop it. If the human community of God’s people acted unjustly, something like a plug was put into the earth. The flow of God’s creative justice was then stopped up. With the waters of justice stopped up, the world was left to dry up into barrenness—into a valley of dry bones. (Ezekiel 37: 1-14)

The test of whether the human community was acting in justice was always the same throughout the Hebrew text of the Bible, the Old Testament. The Hebrew people never had to wonder whether they were being just or unjust because the test was always the same. The test was the well-being of the least in the community.

An accounting of “the least” repeats itself again and again throughout the whole of the Hebrew text of the Bible. It repeats itself with the listing of three distinct people: the widow, the

orphan, and the stranger within their gates. The test asks of them: How is it with the widow? How is it with the orphan? How is it with the stranger within our gates?

Taking care of our own is sort of second nature. Even in hard times, when at all possible, we see to it that those we love have enough to eat and a place to sleep. But what of those we do not know who have no one to care for them? How is it for them in these hard times?

If in fact from under the covenant, you reached out and embraced them as your own, which in fact they are, that was the measure of your justice. And if the people of God were doing justice, then God's justice flowed like a mighty river.

With this explanation of the test for justice, it becomes clear that the scribes strutting around in their long robes and saying their long prayers were and are not passing the test. No, they most certainly are not! Actually, just the opposite is true. They prance around town in their finest religious garb for all to see. They enjoy the pleasure of their importance while they "devour widows' houses."

Justice has dried up in the land because a plug has been put in the earth. God's justice cannot flow like a mighty river. What to do? The answer seems easy enough. Get the scribes to stop! They must again do justice and not tax the poor widows so heavily that they lose their homes.

What to do? The answer seems easy enough. Get the firms that received federal bailout to stop handing out mega bonuses – while the least suffer miserably in this poor economy. The big shots of the world must practice justice and stop taking food out of the mouths of babes to pad their pockets. Yes, it sounds easy enough. But if we expect those lost in self-satisfied, self-righteousness and owned by their wealth to save us—we have our heads screwed on wrong.

We'd best not hold our breath and wait for the authorities lost in their pious, egotistical, acts of self-advancement to save us and break forth the flow of God's righteousness.

So who or what will save us! (*pause*) If you have not learned it yet, around here, the answer to the salvation question is and always will be, "Jesus." From whence will salvation come? It will come from Jesus, of course. Who will give us the power to unplug this barren land where "show me the money" has become the name of the game and violence the answer to all problems? Jesus will! Jesus has opened the flow before and can do it again.

C. William Nichol tells the story of King Cyrus in a sermon of his I once heard. In the ancient history of the Middle East, Cyrus was a very important king. His name is even mentioned in scripture in the book of Isaiah. There's this reputedly true story about a King and a rebel chieftain named Caligula. The story goes thus.

Caligula had authority over land at the southern edge of Cyrus' kingdom. One day Cyrus did battle with Caligula and defeated him. In compliance with what was standard practice of war at that time, Caligula and his wife were brought before the throne of King Cyrus to be given the death sentence. Ordinarily, that sentence would have been automatic—you just can't have the past ruler around when you take over new land. But for some reason, Cyrus was impressed with Caligula as he saw him standing before him tall, strong and courageous, and he began to question him.

"Caligula," he said, "What would you do if I spared your life?"

"Sire, I would return to my home with gratitude and remain the rest of my life your obedient servant."

And then Cyrus said, "Caligula, what would you do if I spared your wife?"

"Oh, your majesty, if you would do that I would gladly die for you."

So impressed was the King that he required of Caligula only that he give him an oath of allegiance, and sent him home a free man. A few days later Caligula and his wife were at home and were talking. He said to her, “Did you see all that beautiful marble in King Cyrus’ palace?”

“No,” she said. “I did not see it.”

“Well, did you notice all the beautiful tapestry that hung on the walls of Cyrus’ house?”

“No,” she said. “I did not notice them.”

Well, surely, you saw that the throne that King Cyrus sat on was pure gold.”

“No,” she said, “I did not see it.”

“Well, what did you see the day we stood before the King?”

“I saw only the face of one who said he would die for me.”

One by one, they all fade away—the marble, the tapestry, the gold, the grudges that smolder in us, the hurts we nurse, and the opinions that divide us. One by one they all fall away, and their power to allude us into believing that somehow these could save us evaporates —when we look upon the face of the One who died for us.

Someone who loves us that much crumbles the crust that has hardened around our hearts. And anytime such a someone surfaces, therein is Jesus.

This someone, Jesus tell us, won’t be the all powerful politicians, religious authorities, or the authority of wealth. This someone, who will bear the face of Jesus will be – guess who? The poor.

Come sit with Jesus today and observe the givers and the takers—and note who will touch your heart. Who will break through the curse but the poor widow who gives everything she had.

I had a long lunch and discussion with the couple from Beam Africa who spoke to us three Sundays back. I gave them the \$200 we collected that Sunday for them. They could not thank me enough. You'd of thought, I'd brought them millions. They repeatedly said, "But you do not know how much this is when you have nothing". They also encouraged us as memberw of Bread for the World, to take a combined group of youth, college students and adults to South Africa. "It will change your people," they said. "In seeing the severity of hunger in South Africa, your people will become passionate about ending it."

I know they are right. I've seen it happen too often. From the college students I brought to stay with homeless men, to the bag lady who gave me her last possession because I bought her a bus ticket to a mental institution, I have watched calloused hearts open. The earth came unplugged so that God's justice might roll like a mighty river, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

The land to which Amos prophesied was a land not too unlike our own. Israel had attained a national prosperity that was never again reached. The military security and economic affluence was theirs—but they were on the edge of losing it all, says Amos to the people, because in your self-satisfaction, you are plugging up the waterworks. And the way out is not through "your solemn assemblies" and other church activities. What's going to unplug our anal retentive constipation will come through doing justice and acts of righteousness.

When we see the face of Jesus in the poor, we will know salvation. We will be transformed as Christ was transformed that day on a hill in Caesarea Philippi. What do you say? Want to go to Africa!?