

Psalm 146:1-10

¹ Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD, O my soul!

² I will praise the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

³ Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.

⁴ When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.

⁵ Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God,

⁶ who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;

who keeps faith forever;

⁷ who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;

⁸ the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.

⁹ The LORD watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

¹⁰ The LORD will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the LORD!

Mark 12:38-44 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

38 As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, **39** and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! **40** They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. **42** A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. **43** 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. **44** 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."

This morning I'd like to tell you a story about Stephen Baltz. Who was Stephen Baltz, you ask? Stephen Baltz was born and died before I was even born. He

was a little red headed kid from Wilmette, Illinois, with loving parents and a sister. He was born in 1949 and died at the age of 11 on December 17, 1960.

I know this because I read this on a plaque in the chapel at New York Methodist Hospital years ago when I was there for a weeklong pastor's clinic. We began our days praying together and singing hymns in the chapel and on our way out of it on Friday, I finally noticed this plaque by the door. It was the only plaque on the wall and so it drew my attention. *Who was Stephen?*

Let me ask you a different question: How many of you were alive on December 16, 1960? How many of you remember *where* you were on December 16, 1960?

The people of Brooklyn knew where they were. That was the darkest, pre-September 11 holiday season in the history of Brooklyn. Shortly before 11:00 a.m. on December 16, 1960, in the middle of the Christmas shopping season, United Airlines flight 826, bound from Chicago, and TWA flight 266, bound for Columbus, collided above Staten Island. The TWA flight fell to the ground at Miller Army Base Field, on Staten Island. The United flight continued on a trajectory towards Brooklyn.

To this day, some think the pilot was trying to make an emergency landing in Prospect Park. He didn't make it. The jet clipped a wing on a tenement two avenues away. It was, for the time, the worst air disaster in U.S. history.

Stephen was on the plane that set fire to twelve buildings and destroyed a church before crashing in the middle of 7th Avenue, Brooklyn. A woman named Dorothy Fletcher found him miraculously alive on a snow bank.

She bundled him up, called to several men to get their car, and took Stephen to Methodist Hospital. On the way to the hospital Stephen talked to Dorothy. He wanted to know if he was going to die. Dorothy said, "Not if we can help it. We're taking you to Methodist Hospital." And he said, "That's good, because I am a Methodist."

Dorothy couldn't save him, but he lived long enough to see his mother and father again. And this mother and father watched their only son die. That same day, Stephen's father donated the full contents of Stephen's pockets—65 cents—to the poor box at the hospital.

It was a sad day, one that Dorothy Fletcher has remembered for over 50 years with flowers at the chapel in Brooklyn, New York Methodist Hospital, the chapel where I had sat each morning during my weeklong clinic and where the plaque bearing Stephen's name and his five nickels and four dimes resides.

When I hear stories about people losing a child, it somehow makes me understand just a little better the words from John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his *one and only* Son."

When I think about the change in Stephen's pocket, I think about the widow that we read about in today's gospel lesson—the widow who caught Jesus'

attention, the widow who gave the contents of her pocket to the collection box at the temple.

Two things startle me about this account of Jesus and the widow. The first is that Jesus was actually *resting*—as detailed in Mark, “He sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd...” (Mark 12.41) The second is that among all of the social elite bustling about the square in their long robes, demanding attention from their very presence and by their very large donations, Jesus notices someone who would have been considered insignificant, perhaps even *invisible*—a widow who donated all she had—two small coins that amounted to about a penny.

Now when we think of Jesus’ resting we need to realize that he has not been still for weeks. Let me give you a quick rehash of what he’s been up to. He has entered Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. The streets are filled with people who have come to do the same. He has objected to the money changers he found at the temple and turned over their tables—which startle some and enrage others. He ministers to the crowds who were captivated by his liberating message. (Mark 11:18) But—as the upended tables give a clue—he is also waging war on two fronts: on one front against a religious system that has become corrupted—and on the other front against the oppressive regime of the Roman Empire.

First the religious elite attempt to trap him into a compromising position. He bested them. Then the Herodians—government men—try to trap him but he maneuvers around their trap. The religious elite attack again with what appeared to be a no win argument, a catch 22. He wins anyway.

He loved the people so much. The poor, the oppressed, the invisible. He fought for them valiantly. How exhausting it must have all been! The mental battles he encountered daily must have been terribly disheartening and tiring. Soon he will lose his life in this battle against these forces of darkness—some misguided, some evil. He knows it’s bound to go that way. Wars cost lives. His war will cost him his. But that’s for another day. Today? Today, he *rests*.

Jesus knows the end is near. He has very little time left. So it is important that we recognize what *he* finds important from here on out. What does he *teach*? What does he *notice*? Today? Today, he *notices* a poor widow giving a mite—a mere pittance—to the temple and *this act* -- this little insignificant act -- causes Jesus to call his disciples to him and instruct 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.”

On this day—Veteran’s Day—I can’t help but think: isn’t that what soldiers do? Put in everything? Put it all on the line? It is not the soldier who decides to make the war, but it is the soldier who puts in his or her everything not knowing what will come of it.

For every soldier here today there is another who gave the ultimate gift—“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” And how about when it is laid down for people we do not even know? This is what a soldier does. They do so at the cost of their innocence, at the cost of their peace of mind, heart, and soul—and sometimes at the cost of their lives.

Regardless of the motivation that causes a soldier to join—whether it be to find a purpose, or to pay for an education, or to follow in their father’s footsteps, or because they were drafted—once a soldier—the real possibility that you will take a life or that your life will be taken—becomes a reality for which the rest of us sit here this morning to acknowledge—and we do so with gratitude.

But I wonder, is it only from the soldier—only from the Veteran—that we expect such devotion? Such service? When Jesus pointed to the widow with her two little coins, he was not pointing to a soldier—he was pointing to an ordinary person among the invisible masses. He was pointing at *us*.

Jesus makes it clear—most gave of their excess; *she gave her all*. They made sure that they had everything they wanted and needed then gave the leftovers to God. The poor widow literally gave her meal by giving her penny—what we call the “widow’s mite,” trusting that God would take care of her. Jesus is challenging us with this story. “She has put in *everything*,” he says with admiration. One of his *last* lessons. One of his *last* points. “She has put in *everything*.”

How much are we putting into our relationships with God? How much are we offering in service to God? How distracted are we by the trappings of power, money and status? How much of *my* “everything” am I putting into my relationship with God...and *my* service to others? How much are *you*?

Who was Stephen Baltz? He was a little boy of little consequence. He had no degree. He did not invent the cure for cancer. He did not build great buildings. He had 65 cents. He was simply a little boy on his way to his uncle’s house for Christmas. But we remember him today because *all he had he gave*—his great courage and his sweet disposition touched every person he met on the last day of his life. It caused people all over the country to pray to God. And it gave a real and human face to an accident which would propel the FAA to develop many of the safety regulations in effect today.

Today I challenge you to put more of your everything—even *all* of your everything—into your relationship with God and your service to others. It was what Jesus was willing to live and die for. It mattered that much to him; how much does it matter to you?

Blessings on the journey. Amen.