

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Well how has your week been? Good week? Bad week? Let me get more specific. How did the election go for you? Good election? bad election? I guess it kind of depends on who you voted for, and who won. And if you're a partly line voter it might not have been completely good or bad. So let's try a clearer example. How was the stock market for you this week? Good or bad? Maybe you weren't paying attention. I wasn't. I had to Google it while writing my sermon. Stock were down this week. 200 points by the end of the week. But whether that's good news or bad news for you depends upon what kind of investor you are. I don't really pretend to understand these things, but I caught a segment on the radio this week about short sellers. These are investors who actually make money when a stock loses value. So this week could have been good for them while your portfolio shrank a little bit. But maybe that example is still too esoteric. So how about for you football fans? Was yesterday a good day or a bad day? If you are an Illini fan, it wasn't a very good day. It started pretty well, but then things got away from them. If you are a Nebraska fan, it was a good day, especially considering that Nebraska isn't having a very good year. What I'm getting at with all of these examples is that the world is full of win-lose scenarios. Some people need to lose for others to win. It's just how things are.

If you've been paying attention to the news in the past few days, or if you have an interest in history, you may know that today is the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I. On the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918, the German and Allied armies signed an armistice agreement that ended the fighting. After the war, November 11th became a national holiday called Armistice day. WWI was referred to as The Great War, and the "war to end all wars." But of course it wasn't. Fifteen years later Adolph Hitler seized power in Germany and began to rearm it. And six years after that the Second World War began. Around 17 million people were killed in WWI, and at least as many wounded – an unprecedented number of casualties in the modern period, thanks to the destructive power of modern armaments. And the deaths in WW2 were three to five times greater, depending on whose numbers you use. It's quite possible that historians of the future will regard the two world wars of the twentieth century to be single war, like the 30 years war of the 17th century. In spite of its name, that war was not 30 years of constant fighting. It was on again off again.

We've been taught to think of wars as having winners and losers, good guys and bad guys, and that in the World Wars we were definitely the good guys. But real history is much more complicated. There is plenty of blame to go around for the circumstances that led to the outbreak of war in 1914. And there is no doubt, in hindsight, that the treaty the allies imposed on Germany after the first war was a major factor in creating the circumstances that led to the second. The truth is that war is never a good thing. It may sometimes be the lesser of two great evils. I think that its better that the allies won the two world wars that it would have if they had lost. Given the alternatives, I'm glad they won. But war is never a good thing, and in many ways it is always a lose-lose proposition.

Sometime after World War II we started observing November 11th as Veteran's Day in the U.S. (and Remembrance Day in the U.K.) It is good and proper that we honor those who put their life on the line for others. And I would suggest that the very best way to honor those who serve in our armed forces is to do everything in our power to avoid sending them to war.

The connection to our Gospel reading this morning is a little tenuous, but the connection I want to make is that this is also about winners and losers, and that the winner/loser scenario is not working, and is not sustainable. We're getting toward the end of Mark's Gospel, and Jesus is now in Jerusalem, at the temple. And it's here at the temple, during the collection for the temple, that Jesus lays into the scribes, the religious elites. Beware of them. They are in it for themselves. They like to be honored, wear nice clothes, draw attention to themselves. But they devour widows' houses. Now the temple collection was meant to benefit not only the temple and the priestly class, but it was also to be used to provide for widows, orphans, and aliens. Jesus is suggesting here that the collection is not being used this way, that the scribes are depriving widows in order to benefit themselves. We see where all of this is going when we get to next week's text. The temple is coming down. Not one stone will be left on another.

We talked about this text at On The Way this past Thursday, and we struggled to find good news in it. Jesus sounds very harsh in his judgment of the scribes. It all seems very negative. All bad news. But, as I tried to demonstrate with my opening examples this morning, whether this text and the one coming up next week are bad news or good news very much depends on who you are. If you are one of those scribes who are getting rich off of the misfortune of others, then the fact that this corrupt institution is about to be destroyed is certainly bad news. But if, on the other hand, you are one of the people being victimized by the system as it is, then it is undoubtedly good news that God is determined to bring it down. The very fact that in the midst of all these rich people and their lavish offerings Jesus notices the widow and her two tiny coins is already good news for people like her. The fact that Jesus then lifts her up as a model of faith above all of these other people, that is remarkable good news for people like her.

So the temple is coming down in this reading today. The old system that is not working is coming to an end. But that does not mean that God has given up on God's people. That's why Jesus is there. His radical, self-giving love is the means by which God is taking charge of the world that God so loves. He will not be the warrior that his people hoped and expected him to be. He will not raise an army and drive out the Roman occupiers. He will not install a new regime that takes revenge on the former oppressors, turning them into the victims of the new system, making the losers the winners and the winners the losers. That's how we would do it. That's how we still do it. And it doesn't work. It doesn't change the world for the better. It only continues an endless cycle of destruction. But that is not how God does it. God in Jesus is doing a new thing. A better thing. Jesus is ushering in a kingdom, a reign, a way of living that is a win-win scenario. This is an alternate reality in which service is greatness, love transforms hate, good outlasts and overpowers evil, and faithfulness triumphs over cynicism and selfishness. And he does this by following the widow's example, by giving everything he has, even his very life, in order to win us for his kingdom. May we take heart in that good news and trust in his promise of life. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.