

**MUST THINGS FALL APART? CAN THE CENTRE HOLD? PSALM 127; MARK 12: 38-44;
11/11/2018; A. CAMERON AIRHART; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

In the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer. Amen

Today marks the 100th anniversary of the ending of the Great War, now more commonly called the First World War. It was a war that plunged the most prosperous societies in the history of the world into a conflict that destroyed the political, economic and social foundations of those societies, and laid the table for international conflicts that still vex us today. Equally important, it altered the cultural thought patterns of the next hundred years, replacing a dominant optimism about human capacity, human nature and the human future with a skepticism about all of these things. The dividing date between the old and the new can perhaps be seen as Christmas Day 1914, when after almost five months of unexpectedly fierce and brutal warfare, soldiers from Germany and soldiers from Britain came out of their trenches into what was becoming known as No-Man's Land, and celebrated Christmas together, singing carols, exchanging Christmas food, worshipping together, burying the dead, and, famously, playing soccer. One British officer from London even had his hair cut by his regular London barber, who was now a private in the German army. Even though a million men had already been killed on the western front, warfare had not yet brutalized these soldiers, but they would be brutalized soon, for the Christmas Truce would not be repeated. If you want to see an interesting retelling of this event, make plans to see Buffalo Opera Unlimited's production *Silent Night* on Nov. 30th and Dec. 2nd. Ask Matt Marco or Ellen Kennedy about it. Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory* called the Christmas Truce, "the last twitch of the nineteenth century... the last moment in which it was assumed that people were nice. It was the last gesture that human beings were getting better the longer the human race goes on." By the end of 1915, and especially by 1918, optimistic assumptions about human nature seemed, at best, quaint. Effects were far reaching. Nineteenth century Liberal theology that emphasized inevitable progress guided by God gave way to the neo-Orthodox theology of Karl Barth that emphasized the depravity of human nature. Freud replaced a superficial rational understanding of our psyches with a darker understanding of our natures that included the Thanatos instinct, the death instinct, making happiness unattainable. Perhaps the most startling example of cultural transformation brought by the war was seen in the ideas of Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, a character who believed human reason could solve all mysteries because human reason was capable of solving all mysteries. But after losing his son in the war, Conan Doyle became a leading exponent of spiritualism, a movement that sought to communicate with the dead by gaining access to the realm beyond reason, a realm that the character Sherlock Holmes had denied even existed. Needless to say, Conan Doyle ceased writing Sherlock Holmes novels, and while we might enjoy Sherlock today, none of us take his methods seriously. The latest version of Holmes treats the character as a sociopath. Other people transformed by the war were C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and Karol Wojtyła, better known as John Paul II. Another transformed person was Adolf Hitler, who spent four years on the western front and was a creature of the war and brought its industrial slaughter to the streets of Germany and the death camps of the East. Such far-reaching cultural consequences must have had far-reaching causes, for human sensibilities shrink from senselessness. How did the war to end all wars begin?

One of my old professors in graduate school was from the University of Belgrade and he had been a student of one of the conspirators in the assassination in Sarajevo in 1914 of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian empire, the event that sparked the war. Two of the conspirators had survived, and one had become the director of the Sarajevo history museum to which the archduke was traveling on that beautiful June day in 1914. The other survivor had become the chair of the history department at the University of Belgrade, and he was the professor of my professor. It made for interesting stories, and they were supplemented by the perspective of another old professor from the University of Berlin. From them, I learned much about the origins of the First World War, that great historical question to which all people who take history classes are subjected. You might remember the answer: the war was caused by entangling alliances that made war inevitable once the right situation presented itself. The system was responsible; no one was at fault. I suspect this is still the correct answer on the AP European history exam. From my professors, though, I learned a different story—I learned an account that was more human and suspenseful, an account that raised irresponsibility and incompetence to almost comic heights. Even the assassination account was a riot of human ineptitude. The young assassin had abandoned his mission that day after an earlier bomb-thrower had failed when his hand-thrown bomb had been batted away from the archduke's car, much like a blocked shot in basketball. Gabriel Princeps, the assassin, pocketed his gun and began to window shop along the main street of Sarajevo, and leisurely crossed to the shady side of the street, where he was suddenly and unexpectedly confronted by the archduke's car backing up towards him at a 5 mile-per-hour pace, for the driver had taken a wrong turn and was correcting his mistake. Finding himself suddenly face-to-face with the archduke, Princeps pulled out his gun and shot him point blank. It was a scene straight out of a Monty Python skit, and, clearly, the assassination planners had been inept and Austrian security was, well, lax, even after a warning from the Serbian ambassador that an assassination plot was underway. This rather hilarious account was the prelude of an interpretation of the outbreak of the war that emphasized and human error, complacency and incompetence by almost all decision-makers in positions of authority. There was the Austrian foreign minister, who at the height of the crisis in the summer of 1914, shoved into his pocket an urgent message from the German foreign minister which he received while gambling at the racetrack and forgot completely about; or the Russian generals who agreed to a partial mobilization against Austria but neglected to tell the Tsar that they had only a total mobilization plan, so they also mobilized against Germany, forcing Germany onto a war footing against them. The same Russian generals went into war had more soldiers than rifles. Or the German ministers who stupidly gave the Austrians a "blank check" of support, and whose generals had a plan to defeat France which they knew was fatally flawed but didn't want to tell anyone lest they lose prestige with a Kaiser who "approached all problems with an open mouth." Or the French, so desperate for allies and friends that they unthinkingly promised Russia complete support; or the British, who had no obligation to support France, but did anyway from a sense of honor, as if life was a Jane Austin novel. And buttressing this mess of incompetence was the firmly held idea that any war would be over by Christmas anyway, and would involve a few large battles dominated by horses, cavalry and sabers. No one had studied the battles of the American Civil War. And all of this was reinforced by newspapers that shaped the public mood,

so that the excitement of war permeated popular imaginations, and men eagerly tried to enlist in order not to miss the adventure. None of this had to happen, and along the way there were many chances to pull back. Why didn't someone in power stop the train? My German professor, with his dry sarcastic humor, concluded his book on the origins of the war with this puckish sentence, "Such things happen." I think he meant this: when powerful people in societies become entrenched, wealthy and out-of-touch with reality, when authority figures become incompetent and irresponsible, when power takes the place of authority, then tragic events are inevitable. What form these events will take is unpredictable; but the idea that something horrible will slough toward Bethlehem can always be intuited by sensitive observers. Like the Belgian artist James Ensor, whose disturbing 1887 painting of fireworks is hanging in the Albright-Knox. Go look at it. And like Jesus in our passage today, instructing us to, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at the banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely."

The "teachers of the law" in Israel were Sadducees and Pharisees, but if we're to learn from this passage then we need to expand our understanding of the word "teacher" and the word "law." We need to remember that we are all teachers to each other and we should also remember that the law is more than judicial codes; indeed, it is mostly unwritten social and moral codes without which no society can function. We grant "teachers of the law" authority when we observe a congruence between their conduct and their words. When we observe this congruence, we give involuntary respect to people and institutions, not because they possess coercive power, but because they have authenticity. And, indeed, authority, or authenticity, does demand respect. But when Jesus said to watch out for the teachers of the law, he was warning us to be on the lookout for degenerate people in power, who liked the trappings of social respect—wearing elegant clothing, receiving respectful public greetings, leading public expressions of religion, and participating in prestigious occasions. They enjoyed the benefits of wielding power, but lacked authority because of the huge gulf between the respect they demanded and the qualities they possessed. They did not possess moral or intellectual virtues, they did not hold themselves accountable to the demands of the law, demands which they had not internalized or made an intimate part of their lives. They were like weaklings in Superman suits, pretending they could fly, and demanding that underlings give respect to them when they were not respectable. While they had power, they did not have authority, and the society that they controlled was riddled with injustice and suffering. It's no surprise that soon after Jesus' ministry two bloody wars would destroy what was left of Israel, in which many widows' houses were destroyed. Devoured homes are also a lyric description of the destruction of the First World War, when irresponsible leaders created a situation they could not control, unleashing the first industrial human conflict in which the industrial might of great nations for four long years was diverted into war materiel, and where the military-industrial complex was first created. What they unleashed was a litany of horrors: twenty million dead, millions more traumatized, millions of homes and buildings destroyed, cities and civilians bombed, soldiers gassed, economies ruined, hearts and minds sorely grieved, and an eventual flawed peace that contained within it the seeds of the next and greater war. Oh yes, Jesus was right; we should surely beware of the teachers of the law, for while they might be punished most severely, those

who are under their power suffer greatly also. Must these things always be? Must things always fall apart? Must we accept that “such things happen?”

There is another way.

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

Here was a widow with authenticity. She was no counterfeit; what you saw on the outside was what was present on the inside. Those two copper coins she gave are what she had and represent all that she was. She was fully committed, fully authentic, and Jesus proclaimed her as possessing the authority of God and the law. She was the opposite of the teachers of the law. And she represents our salvation and deliverance from the trap of power and its destructive forces. If we give ourselves as fully to the truth as this poor widow, we can create a community whose center can hold. I’m talking about each of us asking how we can live our lives so that there is a deep consistency between our words and actions and our inner beings. I have no formula for this, but only a request that you examine yourself and imagine that you are one of the disciples who got called over to huddle with Jesus, and that he was speaking to you when he said, “I tell you the truth, this poor widow put more into the treasury than all the others.” And that you marveled at his words and wondered what they meant for you. What coins are in your hand? Your abilities? Your time? Your influence? Your career? Your family? Your material resources—your money? Speaking of money, most of us remember the famous Watergate phrase: “Follow the money.” We know there is a connection between what we authentically value and how we spend our money. And we know there is no tidy or permanent formula that should apply to everyone. We also know that as a percentage of their incomes, the upper classes give away the least and the lower middle classes give away the most. As we think about our monetary generosity to Westminster over this next week, we must be honest when examining ourselves. In all of our reflections about our time, our abilities, our careers and our influence, we must learn for ourselves to listen to the Holy Spirit who helps us delicately sift what is right for each of us. Stakes are actually high, for these are far from private concerns. In our modern democracy, our corporate culture resembles closely the individual values each of us live out in our local communities. What becomes acceptable in public life reflects what has become the reality of our private lives. We get the government we deserve, and our present unhappiness in our corporate political life is partly because we fear that politics reflects who we have really become as individuals. The answer to this fear, I think, is to model our lives after the widow in today’s story; live an authentic life here and now. And the quality of your life will influence those around you to also be authentic, and this movement will trickle up from our homes and churches to our neighborhoods, our cities and our entire nation. Then, perhaps, things will not fall apart, centers just might hold, and we will truly honor the sacrifices of those who died. And because the Lord will have built the house, we will not have labored in vain, nor will they have died in vain. Amen.