

Scribes and Stewards

Mark 12:38-44

November 12, 2006

I.

I should begin with a word of caution. Today's Gospel is one of those readings that has been misused on occasion by preachers and biblical scholars.

Starting with the example of the scribes and their long robes, the reading has been used to criticize ritual and ceremony in worship, such as we have in the Episcopal Church. Continuing with the example of the widow, it has been used to make people feel guilty for not giving enough money to the church. And finally, in its overall tenor, it has been used to condemn people who have status in society or are financially well-off.

None of those ideas were in the message Jesus intended to convey when he spoke of the scribes or the poor widow. The real meaning of today's Gospel is in the questions it raises concerning how we decide what is important in our lives.

I will get to this in a few minutes. First, however, I would like to raise the general question of the priorities in our lives, and will start with the general observation that it is easy to develop our own understandings of what is important in this world by talking with each other, and by interacting with each other, and by having relationships with each other.

But what happens when we talk with God, interact with God, and have a relationship with God? Does anything change? Are the things that are important to us when we are sitting at home any different from the things that are important to us when we are sitting in church?

I would hope not. In the best of all worlds I would hope that our values, our principles, and our ideals are the same in both places. And I also would hope that what we take from the church influences and guides what we do at home rather than the other way around.

II.

Today's reading began with Jesus' warnings about the scribes. As background, scribes were part of the religious sect of the Pharisees, who insisted on strict compliance with the letter of the law. Scribes had positions of authority in the Jewish culture of the times, and some of the scribes were teachers of the law. The reading then continued with the story of the poor widow and the sometimes unavoidable subject of money.

And in thinking about the law and money, I am taken back to my earlier profession. For many years I was a lawyer, and heard a lot of stories about my colleagues—most were funny, and some were true.

One of the better ones was about the wealthy lawyer who was called upon by someone from a local charity who asked for a donation to the charity's program. In response the lawyer said "You know, I have a brother-in-law with two young children, and he has terminal cancer but no insurance" The person from the charity expressed his sympathy.

Then the lawyer told about his cousin who had lost all of his retirement money because of accounting fraud at the company where he had worked for thirty years, and now was living on welfare. The person from the charity again sympathized said he was sorry to hear that.

Finally the lawyer said that his own mother was barely able to make ends meet, and was still taking in laundry to pay for the groceries. The charity representative was starting to get the picture, and so he thanked the lawyer for his time, and started to leave.

But the lawyer stopped him and asked: "So, if I don't give my money to any of them, what makes you think I would give anything to you?"

I am thankful that we don't have that attitude here at St. Thomas. Even the lawyers among us are generous charitable people who support the church. And in many ways I believe that we are living examples of the meaning behind the two stories in today's Gospel.

III.

Let's look in a little more detail at our lesson about the scribes and the widow. Jesus began by criticizing how the scribes presented themselves. He described them as false in their piety, ostentatious in their worship, and self-aggrandizing in their interaction with others. They focused only on outward appearances designed to glorify themselves and increase their stature. They were supposed to be men of God, but they were living as men of the world.

Mark then changed the setting and described Jesus' reaction to a poor widow who gave her last two coins to the Temple treasury. And the counterpoint was not the scribes, who were not even mentioned, but rather the wealthy people of the time who only gave from their abundance; who only gave to the Temple after they first had satisfied all their own needs.

And at this point, as we read what Jesus said about the scribes and the widow, it is important to not only understand what Jesus said, but also what he did not say.

Jesus did not criticize the scribes' long robes or lengthy prayers as such, but rather spoke of how they postured before others. Jewish worship throughout the history of the Hebrew people had been replete with elaborate rituals and ceremonies, and Jesus did not challenge any of that history. He called these practices into question only when the form and style of worship became more important than its substance and devotion, as is evident with his description of the scribes.

And Jesus did not criticize wealthy people just because they were wealthy. Nowhere is there any teaching in Scripture that a wealthy person is disqualified by wealth from giving appropriately to God. Jesus spoke harshly of the rich only when charity was placed at the bottom of the list of what was important to them.

The messages Jesus wanted to convey in his time instead dealt with the conflicts that arose between outer appearances and inner motives as applied to Temple worship and financial support of the Temple. In our time those same conflicts also can diminish worship and subvert true stewardship.

In terms of worship, for example, Jesus made it clear that self-righteous pomp and pretension is not pleasing to God. If we recall from prior readings, Jesus had constantly warned his disciples against seeking personal honor or glory rather than serving others. And here he proclaimed how the scribes' condemnation would be even greater because they acted in the name of God to hide their own selfish and greedy motives.

And in terms of money, today's Gospel tells us that the important consideration is not how much we give, but the circumstances under which we give and the motives in our hearts as we do so. Money will have no real value in God's kingdom, but the habits of our hearts and the reasons why we do what we do always will be important.

So when this widow dropped her two coins in the box two thousand years ago she probably had no idea that her simple selfless act would live on in Scripture as an example of true discipleship. St. Paul recognized this a few years later in 2 Corinthians 8:12, when he said "the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have."

We don't know whatever happened to the widow in today's Gospel. She appeared briefly and is never mentioned again. I did, however, hear a story several years ago, also about another widow who lived in today's world. I cannot recall when or where it happened, but it always stuck with me and comes to mind whenever I hear this reading from Mark.

The widow had five children and was barely able to survive and care for her family. But she was a regular worshipper at church, and somehow the priest discovered that she was giving \$50 each month to the church, which was a tithe of her income.

So he called in one of his deacons and pointed out that this money was a lot more important to the widow than the church. He asked the deacon to meet with her and tell her she should feel no obligation to give money to the church, and she was free from any responsibility to do so.

The deacon met with her and conveyed what he thought was the priest's caring suggestion, and as he spoke she began to look downcast and tears came to her eyes. "I want to tell you," she said, "you are taking away the last thing that gives meaning and dignity to my life."

Because this is Stewardship Sunday, in the time remaining I would like to focus a little more on the imagery of these two widows, and talk about stewardship in the broad sense.

Hopefully you already have prayerfully considered your pledge, and will offer those pledges later during the service as the offering plates are passed. So what I say now is not intended to influence your decision because I assume most of you already have filled out your pledge cards.

I do hope, however, to influence your ideas about stewardship in general because we believe, in the Episcopal Church, that stewardship is a year-round discipline, and includes the giving of our time and our talent as well as our financial resources. And in the year ahead I hope that you not only will continue your involvement in ministries here at St. Thomas, but also actively will participate with us as we develop new ways to serve God, care for each other, and extend the church into the community.

IV.

I would like to go back to the beginning of this sermon and my comments about how we decide what's important in our lives, and how we set our priorities. We know that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke tell us that where our treasure is, there also we will find our hearts.

But we also can say the same thing about our time, and how we use our abilities, and most importantly, why we do it. In the end, it all comes back to why we are here. If we go to church for the wrong reasons, then we are tempted to look at stewardship in the wrong way.

To paraphrase those messages from Matthew and Luke, I believe it also is accurate to say that where our stewardship is, there also we find our faith.

If people come to church to truly worship God and to participate in a community of faith, then they will give back to God a portion of what he has given them in order to honor God and support that community. And they will do it year-round in many different ways, not just when it comes time to write checks.

On the other hand, if people come to church because they see an opportunity to gain personal recognition through work in church activities, or if they believe church is a way to gain social status, then Jesus would say that they are the equivalent to modern day scribes.

I know that you all here at St. Thomas are in the first category and not the second. And I truthfully can say that every time I have called on someone here to help in some way there always has been a positive response. You all are quick to help and to do so cheerfully.

My prayer is that we can expand that attitude and tradition. You probably have heard someone repeat the old saying that in church, twenty percent of the people do eighty percent of the work. I think that first number probably is higher at St. Thomas, and that we have greater involvement of the people. But in the months and years ahead I hope we can make it higher still. If we can do that, not only in November when it comes time to pledge, but also throughout the year, then we indeed will be doing God's work.

V.

Today's Gospel described a widow with a big heart who lived in poverty. Although the reading praised her heart, it did not set forth poverty as a holy objective. Jesus did not say "go out and be poor." Today's reading is a model for becoming a disciple, not for becoming destitute.

And discipleship means giving to God. Certainly it means pledging to the church as we will do later in the service, but it also means giving God our hearts and our attitudes. It also means bringing our motives for doing things in line with God's will.

These two stories of the worldly scribes and the godly widow illustrate the conflicts and tensions in the lives of most of us. And they call us to examine the reasons why we do what we do, both in the world and in church. They tell us that whatever we do and wherever we go we take with us what is in our hearts. And in that inevitable day when we all are called to account for the content of our lives, one of the questions will be, "were we scribes, or were we stewards?" *Amen.*