BEWARE!

Pentecost 27, 2024

"Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God."

"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" at the Patriots games at Gillette Stadium – I mean, "in the synagogues, and places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearances say long prayers" and preach really, really long sermons....

Apologies to Mark 12:38ff

We got a little off track last week (despite Elaine's fine sermon which got us ready for election day – reminding us that we each carry a light as God's saints on earth). Today we return to the Gospel of Mark to find that Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem after their long trek through Galilee, Judea, and the Transjordan. The Palm Sunday parade has already happened – which has put both the temple leadership and the Roman authorities on edge. He has had bitter disputes with the Sadducees in the temple courtyard, and they have attempted to catch him in some heresy for which they could hang him. These public conversations were better than TV and have drawn a huge crowd just at festival time, and without something more substantial to go on, the Pharisees and Sadducees have held back on their scheme. Today the Gospel opens with their latest salvo – asking Jesus to declare which of the Commandments is more important – an impossible question, they hope. But, once again, he foils their plan. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, your mind, your strength – and your neighbor as yourself!" One of the scribes can hardly

contain himself. “Well said,” he laughs. “Well said!” Jesus turns to him and smiles. “You are not far from the kingdom, my friend.”

And now we pick up the story with today’s appointed reading. “Beware,” says Jesus, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes (read, fancy clothes), and to be greeted with respect in the marketplace, and to have the best seats in the synagogues (where they would be seated just in front of the altar, facing the congregation so to be seen and worshipped), and have places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers….”

Then Jesus and his friends left the temple grounds and went across the street to watch the crowd putting their pledges in the temple treasury. Unlike Episcopalians, the process of paying ones pledge was a matter of getting cash money out of the bank, taking it to the church, and then pouring it into a metal cone in the courtyard wall where everyone standing around could listen to just how many coins you had tossed in – the heavier ones would, of course, have made a much deeper, louder ring allowing everyone to know just about how much you gave. Jesus and his followers were not the only ones watching and listening – everyone was paying attention.

So when the poor widow came with her two copper coins, everyone knew two things: first, that she had barely given a penny’s worth for her pledge – barely enough to buy a biscuit much less a meal, (and, by the way, no long robes for the clergy ) but secondly and more importantly, somebody had not been doing their job. As much as it said something about the woman’s commitment (giving to God everything that she had, thereby loving God with

all her heart, soul, mind, strength. And financial resources), it said something more about the failure of those commanded by Deuteronomic Law – the Scribes – to care for the widow. By pointing out that the widow had just given her last farthing, Jesus was also saying that the church had failed her – that the scribes were spending way too much time and money one their fancy clothes and not taking care of the church's business as commanded. The scribes were enjoying all the fawning of society without doing the work that was expected. They might have come with a rather large tithe for the public to witness, but Jesus was convinced that a good bit of that money had come at the expense of the widows. In some cases, he apparently thought the scribes were stealing the homes of the widows right from under their feet. According to Deuteronomic Law, Scribes (the church) were expected to care for the widows and orphans – and for the sick and disabled. They were forbidden from charging fees or from taking any gifts for their service. And yet it appears that there were more than a few lawyers (scribes) who were not entirely trustworthy. They devoured widows' houses while saying long prayers and preaching long sermons….

This was Jesus' evaluation of the church of his day. It was failing to live up to its lofty expectations of itself. And as he and the disciples left the temple that day, the next episode in Mark's Gospel tells of Jesus' prediction that the temple would not survive. The failure of the church to meet its obligations to the disadvantaged would mean its downfall. A generation later it would be left in ruins with the only remnant being referred to later as "the wailing wall."

Jesus' confrontation with the temple leadership, his overthrowing of the money-changers tables, his withering rebuke of the Scribes and Pharisees might help us take stock of how the church today is doing. How is it that we love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength? Who are the people of God we need to be reaching out to today? If widows and orphans are getting some of what they need through government services, what more should the church to be doing? The mission hasn't changed – but maybe there are other communities that need our support that are just as pressing. So we build window inserts, we fill Woody's Christmas box – at least three times! We fill the food bank. What are we missing?

To love God with all our life is to love our neighbors – especially those who are struggling. So let us do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. Amen