

The Price of Appearances – Mark 12:38-44 - Nov 12, 2006

I suspect that many of you – well, the few of you who don't have advance copies of this sermon – upon hearing the text from Mark's gospel that introduces to us the story of "the widow's mite" and especially after hearing Rev. Herb Gale last week think that this will be Part 2 of Herb's sermon. Relax! I'm not going there, at least not yet.

When I first read this text to begin preparing for today, I was initially struck by the promise of condemnation made by Jesus. Much to the chagrin of many Christians today and indeed the chagrin of many non-Christians who have heard a somewhat distorted message from those Christians, Jesus didn't really say much in the way of condemnation. There are only three times in the gospels he is quoted as using this word, and one of those is a parallel in Luke's gospel of the incident here. There are only eleven times the word 'condemn' occurs in the gospels, and not all are negative, as for example in John 3:17 where Jesus declares he has not come into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved.

So, here in our reading we have a rare promise from Jesus of condemnation. Who is the target of that unusual promise? Some anonymous sinner? Some scurrilous person who refuses to worship, or who turns their back on God? Well, in a sense, yes – but not who you would think of at first. Those for whom Jesus promised "the greater condemnation" were the crème-de-la-crème of the religious elite! They were the scribes, the learned and respected religious authorities who issued the religious writs, deeds, judgments and other legal documents of the day. Remember that the law, at least the civil law, was based upon the Levitical codes from the Hebrew scriptures. Criminal law was mainly Roman law, but the day-to-day stuff of contracts, deeds, forfeitures and foreclosures was under the scrutiny and control of the priests and scribes, although primarily the scribes.

Were the scribes promised condemnation merely because they were doing their jobs? No, it seems clear that Jesus had two major related complaints against them. His first complaint was against their striving to maximize the perks of their job – wealth, respect, "the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at the banquets." Perhaps this wasn't so much of a complaint as a characterization, a description of their human frailty, a frailty with which we can relate. The second part of what Jesus had to say about them shows us what moved him to predict condemnation – first, that they "devoured widows' houses," betraying the trust accorded to them to implement justice; and second, that they "prayed long prayers for the sake of appearances." Wow! What price appearances, if the cost is condemnation? It would seem to be a very expensive proposition pretending to be religious just to be called faithful – or is it pretending to be faithful just to be seen as being religious? Perhaps it doesn't matter which way around it is pretended, but instead the problem is the mistake of believing that appearances are important to God.

Sadly, the church has too often fallen into that trap of believing that God is somehow fooled by appearances and The Presbyterian Church in Canada hasn't been immune from this, either. Somewhere along the way from the days of the church as enthusiastic evangelizers in the mid-1800's the church changed to focus on respectability as the main characteristic to be desired, and often took that well into the worship of appearances. I'm not yet totally sure of all the causes because I'm still doing some research in this area for my thesis, but the shift to appearances becoming the holy grail seems to have occurred partly as a result of the church moving to see itself as the protector of moral values in the Victorian era. This move was perhaps accentuated in Canada in part due to the rapidly-developing "new world" society in which newcomers, immigrants, were struggling to establish themselves and what better way to quickly establish or legitimize yourself in such a blossoming brand-new society than to cloak yourself with the respectability of the church?

And that worked - new social orders were quickly established that often if not always reflected a church heritage. Prestige and respect were accorded in society to those who held offices in the church. Specific pews ("best seats") were accorded by rank – sometimes even through recognizing significant donations and contributions to the temple coffers. I can't think of any specific examples here in

Vancouver, but I do know that in some large churches in central Canada the pews even had little doors on the aisles, and honoured members were escorted to “their” places of honour with great respect by ushers in tails – and God help anyone else who dared sit there! Such congregations represented the bastions of decency and good taste, but even congregations in small towns were not immune from visits from the “white glove squads” – women from the church who tested the tops of door frames with their white gloves to make sure that housekeeping was being done properly in the homes of the fashionably faithful. (I kid you not!)

But we don’t have to look back fifty years or more to find examples of the same kind of focus on appearances in the church. Look no further than your TV set to see images of row upon row of nearly-identical smiles on the faces of beautiful people filling some mega-church and ask yourself if there is a “right” image of righteousness, and even a hierarchy of religious beauty. The ranking of expensive SUV’s in the acres of parking lots at these suburban churches is a clue that widows’ houses are still being devoured. The criteria that define “seats of honour” may have changed but there are definitely still “seats of honour” in many congregations. Another all-too-common example of an inappropriate focus on appearances is the aging congregation that bleeds its resources dry trying to maintain an old, expensive and dysfunctional building because it is “beautiful” in their eyes at least.

Blessedly, we are not left graceless, with only a negative example to work from in scripture. The negative observation by Jesus of those leaders in the church who strove to be recognized and to maximize the perks of their office is countered by his positive observation of the widow with the two coins. In stark contrast with those noted officials who were focused on themselves, and what others were thinking of them, and on how much they could take from the system, we see through Jesus’ understanding eyes a woman of faith focused on giving, acting on behalf of others, dedicated to what she could put into the system.

At the core, this text is not about money. To be sure, money is the symbol used to highlight the differences between the rich scribes and the poor widow, and many a sermon has been preached about how everyone should deposit their last two coins into the coffers of the church. Whenever I hear one of these sermons I wonder to myself whether the preacher recognizes how close they are walking to saying, “a lot of money is bad, a little bit of money is good” – probably not exactly the message they had in mind!

But I believe the heart of the message here is to highlight the difference between takers and givers, between those for whom appearance is everything and those who offer their everything. Boiled down to the essentials, we are told in this text that being religious for the sake of appearances is bad, being truly faithful is good – another lesson from scripture that is so easy to understand, so difficult to live. This lesson is so difficult because it calls us to examine ourselves, our motives, our values; to face with honesty and integrity who we are and what is really important to us. This simple yet difficult lesson urges us to ask of ourselves in everything we do, “am I doing this to look important, or because I am doing the right thing?” That’s a tough question to ask of anyone, and a REALLY tough question to ask yourself! Ask that question of someone else, and you’ll most likely get hit with a very strong reaction – probably not a good thing! Ask it of yourself, and you might discover you are either hiding from yourself or facing some painful truths. On the other hand, you might very well discover that indeed you are doing the right things for the right reasons, and that is not only a very good thing but a great comfort and reassurance in your faith, a reason to give thanks.

The really important thing to remember from this understanding is to recognize that you are not alone – that the Comforter Jesus promised, the Holy Spirit, is with us and among us and in us to guide us into all truth, that we may face ourselves with honesty and integrity and answer the difficult question posed by this text, the question of how to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ, our Lord.