

FLOWING ROBES AND FRONT-ROW SEATS

TEXT: Mark 12:38-44

The story is told of a rabbi who was preparing for the Day of Atonement. He paraded around beating his breast and saying, “I am nothing. I am nothing”. A cantor followed suit and did as his rabbi. The two marched through the synagogue demonstrating their “humility”. The janitor witnessed the ritual and was reminded of his own sinfulness. He too began to beat his breast and cry out in attrition, “I am nothing”. When the rabbi heard the janitor, he turned to the cantor and smugly said, “Now look who thinks he is nothing”. As we listen to the words in today’s scripture, we do so with one of these two attitudes. We are either like the rabbi who only pretended to need God, or like the janitor who truly saw himself as nothing without God.

This is much the same as the text we just heard where Jesus makes a series of charges against the scribes. Jesus points to men entrusted with religious leadership who have turned their positions of trust into selfish sinecures (that is jobs that require little work but pay well). They focus on what they can get rather than what they can give. Their long robes, expensive and impractical for manual labor, identify them as professionals. These scribes relish the public honors that accompany their positions. In the marketplace, people rise respectfully when they approach. In the synagogue, scribes sit in seats of honor on the dais facing the congregation – seeing, but more importantly, being seen. The scribes often wore tassels at the edge of their outer robe. These tassels were to remind them that they were the people of God. At all events they liked to dress in such a way that it drew attention to themselves and to the honor they enjoyed. It was a way to show the people the difference between the “haves” and the “have-nots”. As we look at the description of these well-dressed scribes, we see that Jesus places three charges against them.

First of all, these scribes were guilty of abuse of their assumed position. Jesus is not just talking about any scribes, but he is talking to any of us who misuse our position to gain personal honor. What is this warning to us? It is the effect of someone seeking

personal honor so that too often someone else suffers. In this case it is namely widows. The scribe pilfers yet another coin out of the temple offering to afford his long robe, and a widow misses a meal. The scribe pursues prestige by trying to run in the fast crowd, by seeking a place of honor at banquets, and a widow is left homeless. And it works the same way today. When we seek prestige, wealth, fame, and especially honor for ourselves, someone is bound to get hurt along the way. Lurking behind designer clothes labels are often sweatshops. Behind wealthy 19th-century plantation owners were slaves. There are many examples throughout history.

Even today we see these things happening. We need to remember that stewardship over the lives of vulnerable people is an issue, not only for synagogues and churches, but for everyone: Business executives are tempted to treat customers and employees as cogs in the moneymaking machine. Government officials are tempted to sell policy and privilege for campaign contributions or personal favors. Military leaders are tempted to put personal promotions above the welfare of subordinates. Teachers are tempted to put salaries and work conditions above students. Mechanics are tempted to recommend unneeded repairs. It is not necessary to be rich or powerful to victimize vulnerable people, and it is not only people at the bottom who are vulnerable. An embezzler victimizes his/her employer. A person who falsely accuses a supervisor of discrimination or harassment becomes the harasser.

It is possible for nearly any of us to injure vulnerable people. Of those who do so, Jesus says, “These will receive greater condemnation”.

This stern warning from Jesus is against the desire for prominence. It is still true today that many a person accepts office in the church – or in the public arena - because he or she thinks it has been earned, rather than because of a desire to render selfless service to the house and the people of God. There are still those who regard office in the church as a privilege rather than a responsibility.

The second concern Jesus notes is an over-arching concern with titles and social recognition. “The Right Reverend”, for instance, has sometimes been demanded by a socially prominent minister.

Jesus tells us that worse than exploiting the widow is the unfaith that hides behind the exploit of honoring self. The scribe who devours widows’ homes must fear, love and trust his honor above anything else. This is the person who has made self honor his god.

Almost everyone likes to be treated with respect. Yet a basic fact of Christianity is that it ought to make a person obliterate self rather than exalt it. There is a wonderful story of a monk, a very holy man, who was sent to take up office as abbot in a monastery. He looked so humble a person that, when he arrived, he was sent to work in the kitchen as a scullion, because no one recognized him. Without a word of protest and with no attempt to take his position, he went and washed the dishes and did the most menial tasks. It was only when the bishop arrived a considerable time later that the mistake was discovered and the humble monk took up his true position. The man who enters upon office for the respect which will be given to him has begun in the wrong way. Unless he changes, he can never be in any sense the servant of Christ or of his fellow men.

The third sin that Jesus brings in this passage is commercialization – taking financial advantage of the most fragile members of the community. Here it is suggested that the scribes, who were to earn their own living, would and could demand hospitality beyond the biblical limitations of a day or two. Wealthy widows were especially vulnerable as rascals in every age have always discovered. I have read the story of a notorious individual who would make off with wedding rings from the newly widowed women who were persuaded to put these now “useless” symbols out of sight and mind.

There is even the story of one widow whose pastor told her that by virtue of her status, the Lord expected at least fifteen per cent to be given to the church because she no longer had the expense of a family!

Again Jesus has the last word for these scoundrels. “They will receive the greater condemnation”, Jesus declares. Honoring oneself rather than showing mercy for the needy results in condemnation. God has no use for those who seek self-honor over compassion. God warns against any attempt to make a traffic of religion.

So, what do we learn from this text? Jesus has pointed out that these people who 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 banquets, and those who devour widows’ houses and make a show of lengthy prayer, will be punished most severely.

How do we avoid this punishment?

First, we must avoid those behaviors and attitudes that lead to them. It is so easy to fall for the status-hungering of titles or roles that reek of privilege. The roles we accept should carry the sense of responsibility for furthering the Kingdom of God, rather than the princedom of ourselves.

We all see people who never miss an opportunity to parade their status, show their rank and remind us of their power. Often these days we see those who demand the best seats, believing that they have earned the attention they are given.

I’ve chosen to focus today on the early verses of today’s text, rather than the more commonly told story of the widow who gave generously of what little she had. But the two stories, back to back, show the contrast between the humble widow’s generosity and the very class-obsessed hypocrisy of the greedy scribes.

I believe we can see examples of this hypocrisy today – in our communities, in our government, and, yes, in our churches. And, as hard as it is to admit it, probably in our own lives as well.

What do we do about this? Interestingly, in the previous passage that we did not read today, Mark tells us that Jesus has given us an easy answer. Jesus describes for us the very opposite behavior that he ascribes to the scribes. In Mark's earlier verses, Jesus tells us that we are to love God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves. What an easy answer! If we follow this basic rule – this first and greatest commandment – we will not need the flowing robes. We will not feel it necessary to have the best seats in the house. If I am personally serious about avoiding the hypocrisy of the scribes, I will love God; I will love my neighbor; and give as the widow gave. Amen