

#Of Scribes and Widows

Mark 12:38-44

Proper 27/ Year B

November 8, 2009

O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Amen.

In an entry from his book, Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary, the author Frederick Buechner makes the following comments about money: "The more you think about it, the less you understand it" he writes, "The paper its printed on isn't worth a red cent. There was a time you could take it to the bank and get gold or silver for it, but all you would get now would be a blank stare. The value of money, like stocks and bonds, goes up and down for reasons not even the experts can explain and at moments nobody can predict, so you can be a millionaire one moment and a pauper the next without lifting a finger. Great fortunes can be made and lost completely on paper There is more concrete reality in a baby throwing its rattle out of the crib." Buechner continues his assessment, stating rather pointedly, that "there are people who use up their entire lives making money so they can enjoy the lives they have entirely used up."

When it comes right down to it, there is nothing quite like the topic of money to make a sanctuary full of people ill at ease. We are infinitely more comfortable discussing the brokenness surrounding divorce, adultery and sexual promiscuity than we are at handling what Christ has to say about our finances. Despite the strident and supposedly pressing concerns of some folks, on both the religious right and the religious left, Christ spends more time talking about dollars and cents than he does anything else in the gospels. He seems to know that we are a terribly conflicted people when it comes to our wallets and purses. Conflict, however, is something with which Jesus is incredibly familiar. In fact, conflict is at the very heart of Mark's gospel. Jesus is engaged in conflict from the gospel's very first chapter until his death on the cross, some six hundred and forty-eight verses later. From the viewpoint of Saint Mark, Jesus, and the kingdom he inaugurates within himself, have come to defeat evil. While evil can take numerous concrete forms, including the demonic, it can just as readily attach itself to our more commonplace human values including our concerns for wealth and security.

Today's gospel reading, occurs at a critical point within Saint Mark's account. Jesus has spent, roughly the previous three chapters, teaching his followers (with varying degrees of comprehension) to give up their ambition for high honor, good reputation, prestige and pride of place. He tells them to put aside those things by which the average person (even in our own day) would use to measure self-worth. Instead, they are to become servants, to become children, to put others before themselves. Not only does Jesus challenge his listeners to think differently about the world in which they live but he also challenges them to think about what is truly important as they go about living their lives. Through his very words and actions, the Lord is determined to turn the usual definitions of power and kingship on their heads. A fact made all the more apparent by his decision to enter Jerusalem, not as some vaunted warrior-messiah on the back of a beautifully caparisoned white steed, but instead as a prophetic figure who comes, humbly, even gently,

riding on a donkey.

The atmosphere which surrounds this morning's reading is quite tense. Following his arrival in the holy city, Jesus spends the better part of the ensuing week within the precincts of the Temple. With Passover rapidly approaching, the Temple is extraordinarily crowded. Pilgrims, together with their unsuspecting and bleating sacrifices, are everywhere. They stream in through the gates, endlessly traversing the stone courts as countless vendors attempt to sell them savory kebabs and kitschy souvenirs. The sanctuary priests are ever-present. With their long white robes of pressed linen and oddly-shaped tubular hats, they stick out like sore thumbs. Their unenviable task of managing the crowds is made more difficult by the incessant din of voices and the metallic clatter of coins echoing from the nearby porticoes. The money-changers, whom only a day or so earlier had been chased off by Jesus, are once again doing a swift business. The air is congested with the odors of sweat and food underwritten by the coppery scent of blood. The Temple resembles a marketplace more than a religious shrine, a reality which has not gone unnoticed. In fact, Jesus' words this morning, while not aimed directly at the Temple, do address those attitudes which make turning religion into a commodity possible. To say that Jesus, literally "attacks the scribes" would not be too strong a statement. The language he uses is harsh, cutting and (given the fact that he is sitting in the Temple) ill-advised.

"Watch out for the scribes," he tells a gathering crowd, "They love to walk around in their robes, preening in the radiance of public flattery, basking in prominent positions, sitting at the head of the table at every social function. And all the time, they are exploiting the weak and helpless. The longer their prayers, the worse they get. But they'll pay for it in the end." Jesus, in essence, throws down the proverbial gauntlet. He speaks forcefully and accusingly to the religiously well-connected, many of whom are probably within earshot. The scribes, as respected and professional interpreters of the law, are undoubtedly present somewhere within the Temple. If they are unaware of Jesus' pronouncement, they will not remain so for long. Jesus and the scribes have locked horns several times before in Mark's gospel. That being said, Jesus' statement, this morning, is not meant as a rhetorical flourish against old opponents, nor is Jesus engaged in the verbal sparring of an academic debate. He is not quibbling with the scribes over their interpretation of scripture anymore than he is quibbling with us. He is naming their sin. The scribes may have knowledge about the ways of God, but as far as Christ is concerned they are not practicing the ways of God. Their hypocrisy lies somewhere between their head and their heart. In other words, they have not permitted what they know and believe to form who they are? This problem is far from uncommon among us religious folks. If we are honest with ourselves, most of us know what we should do when it comes to our faith, but we often do not do it. Or, in the worst cases, we do the exact opposite of what we profess to believe. Jesus' anger toward this kind of behavior is considerably pronounced. "Rather than sacrificing yourselves for the sake of others," he seems to be telling us, "you preen about in our own self-importance. Rather than crucifying yourselves on behalf of those who are most vulnerable in society, you exploit them intentionally and unintentionally." Whether we wish to admit it or not, Jesus is speaking the uncomfortable truth to us. We are often like the scribes. We do things for the sake of appearances. We hide behind masks of piety. We send long-winded prayers heavenward while at the same time studying our scriptures and refusing to allow the words

to transform us. We, too, enjoy upward mobility and the finer things in life offered by our consumer culture. Given half a chance, we can almost pretend that all is well with us, that there isn't a disconnect between our beliefs and actions. Unfortunately, the hypocrisy, the discord, within our souls will eventually become too much for us to handle. The good news for us is that we don't have to live such discordant, disconnected, hypocritical lives. Jesus has come to show us a better way, a way rooted in the least and the lost.

He gestures toward this new way of being when he finally sits down opposite the Temple treasury. The area around the offering plates is exceptionally busy as rich and poor make their contributions. Among those determined to contribute is a "poor widow." She is one of the most vulnerable members of society. She is a person who would normally be easy pickings for the less-than-scrupulous scribes. She places two copper coins, humbly and without fanfare, into the offering plate. Her paltry two cents is insignificant when placed beside the enormous sums that others have given to the Temple. Her contribution will barely even register as a drop in the bucket amid the vast wealth of the treasury. Jesus, however, finds her sacrifice remarkable for the sheer fact that it is a sacrifice. "Look there," he says to the disciples "that poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. The others gave what they will never miss, she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford. She gave her all". In other words, "She gave her life away." To those of us who are more cautious and calculating, the widow's actions appear utterly foolish. No one with an ounce of sense gives away their life, even if its only worth a couple pennies. Then again, isn't that what Christ himself is about to do for us on a hill outside Jerusalem? The Lord has been telling us, over and over again in various ways, that in order to gain our lives, we must lose them. We must take the abundance of who we are and, yes, what we have, and relinquish them, not grudgingly but extravagantly. Christ holds open this possibility for us. We no longer have to live grasping, fearful, self-focused lives mired down by more possessions than we really need. We can enter into life like the poor widow, unafraid, self-giving and serving God. We can even have a touch-of-the-fool about us. What would it mean for us to be foolishly and extravagantly generous? The temptation, of course, is to quantify it in terms of dollars, cents and percentages of income. Christ, however, is not interested in our math. He is interested in us and in the countless ways we can give of ourselves. He is interested in our willingness to trust in him for our future, not by complacently sitting in our pews but by actively pursuing the kingdom of God. He is interested in how we can best reflect his sacrificing love to the world through the giving of our time, talents and, yes, treasure. If you want to put a figure on that kind of love, on Christ's love for us, you are more than welcome to try, just don't be surprised when it is ultimately swallowed up, graciously, by infinity.