

Sermon: Long Robes and Church Coffers**Scripture: Mark 12:38-44****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: November 8, 2015**

Someone called us hypocrites not this week. I've been going around town and having conversations with townsfolk over the past couple of months coming to know Winchester better and introducing myself to people around the community. In one conversation I was having with someone he admitted that he hadn't been to church in a long time. I guess he felt pretty comfortable speaking straight with me because he said quite frankly "I don't go to church because I don't like the hypocrisy of churches. They preach one thing and live another." Ouch! Kind of a sweeping indictment, but what do you say to that other than to acknowledge that it's the truth of the matter at least to some extent? What is the church but a gathering of humans and all of us humans struggle to live our lives in alignment with what we say our values are and we all fail at times... except apparently the guy I was talking to this week.

The problem with the church and hypocrisy though is that in a certain way we are forced to wear it on our sleeves because weekly we come in here and read the words of Jesus and pray the words of scripture and proclaim the values that we are trying to live by and then we go out there into the world and fail to live them fully – at least I know I do - and the next week we come back here and we confess our sins and read the words of Jesus again and proclaim again what our deepest values are and we go out there and maybe do better but still fail at times and come back here and the cycle continues. So yes, church people can be hypocritical but ideally we recognize it and acknowledge it, and then we can feel proud of our self-awareness and because humility is one of our values, darn it!, we are being hypocritical!

It's like the story of the monks in a monastery who are speaking together mystically about the glory of God's Infinite Divine Presence, and how in comparison they themselves are "nothing."

“Yes,” says the one monk, “I am nothing!”

The other monk also affirms, looking up to the heavens, “O God, I am completely *nothing!*”

And they go on like this — “I am nothing... I am utterly nothing.”

Meanwhile, the monastery’s janitor is off in the corner on his hands and knees and he has heard their conversation while scrubbing the floor and so he also also begins repeating in a gentle voice,

“O Lord, You are everything and I am nothing... I am nothing.”

The two monks at one point stop to listen in and, after a few moments, come to realize what he is saying. When they do, the one monk nudges the other and smugly says, “Look who thinks *he’s* nothing!”

Our lives are filled with contradictions and paradox and spiritual practice tends to highlight that so you try to be humble only to notice how proud you are of your humility or you try to let go and let God and realize how hard your working let it be or you study the faith and the scriptures only to become more and more aware of how little you know or you become more religious only to realize that our religion is built around a man, Jesus Christ, whose staunchest resistors and foes were the most religious of the day. Paradoxically, one of the gifts of spiritual practice and spiritual growth is a dawning awareness of the contradictions in our lives and the hypocrisies we live.

And that is not far from where we are placed this morning reading this scripture from Mark. Jesus says beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes and who like to have the best seats in the house!” Ironic, no? That I am sitting up here in a seat that I really like and preaching to you with my long robe on that I enjoy wearing. And I’m feeling a little annoyed at Jesus for making such a big deal about it all. C’mon man!

But it’s not just me and Judy that he has called out on the floor this morning. He also has a few choice words about raising money for the institution. At first glance it appears that this passage in Mark is about sacrificial giving; that the widow who gave two small copper coins is giving so much more out of her poverty than the rich are giving out of their abundance and so we too should give

sacrificially like the widow. This is the interpretation that inspired the creators of the lectionary to place this particular text in November during church pledge drives. However, in a closer reading of the text, it is definitely not what Jesus is saying at all and it is not helpful necessarily for our pledge drives!

Jesus calls his disciples to him and points out the poor woman who has just given two small coins and says “out of her poverty has put in everything she has, all she had to live on.” You could read it as Jesus admiring her, but then you’d have to ignore verse 40 where Jesus says of the scribes who are the higher ups in the temple religious complex: “they devour widows houses”! So you realize that Jesus is not saying “can you believe how great she is” but rather “can you believe how unjust the temple system is that it would require of this widow all that she has to live on!” Jesus is not commending sacrificial giving, but rather he is highlighting the temple’s economic exploitation of the poor and vulnerable. The widow is not an icon of generosity but a victim of the system. Jesus is not commending the temple but condemning it.

In case you have any doubts then you just need to read the very next two verses that come when Jesus walks out of the temple with his disciples and one of his disciples is looking around all gaga over the immense temple structure and what does Jesus say- - “thank goodness that widow is helping to keep this place up!” – no way! He says “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another, all will be thrown down!” And Jesus really does not seem to care.

Good gracious, this just is not good for church business – so we’ve got to sustain an institution in the name of a man who was frankly at times anti-institutional; we’ve got to maintain the establishment in the name of one who constantly challenging it and was eventually crushed by it; we’ve got to provide for our organization with the kind of wealth that Jesus said was better given to the poor or altogether dispensed with if we want to get into the kingdom of God.

These are a few of the dilemmas, the contradictions, the hypocrisies we face as we seek to be the church and they are so terribly and perfectly human that we’d be crazy to expect anything different from the very human church.

The monk and writer Thomas Merton writes: "I have become convinced that the very contradictions in my life are in some ways the signs of God's mercy to me; if only because someone so complicated and so prone to confusion and self-defeat at times could hardly have survived for long without special mercy." We could say the same for God's blessed church that can make so complicated God's simplicity, that can be prone to confuse what God has made quite clear and that can be self-defeating at times but the truth of the matter is that our continued survival is a testament not to our own greatness and ingenuity but to God's special mercy which is renewed day by day and this we proclaim not just for ourselves but we seek to be conduits of that special mercy to the world around us. We bear witness to the fact that we are blessed by God's mercy despite our hypocrisies and contradictions and because we know that of ourselves, we therefore take up the call to share God's mercy with others no matter their hypocrisies and contradictions as well. We are all of us held under the reign of God's mercy, Amen.