

“SMOKE AND MIRRORS”
A Sermon by Richard Clewell
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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TEXT: Mark 12: 38-44

A friend of mine made the observation that the glamour and glitz of our media age often make it hard to figure out what is genuine or real. Everything comes wrapped in spin to make it sell. In our present culture we have become so accustomed to and enamored with the unreality of TV, movies, and advertising that such facades and phoniness have carried over into business, politics, and religion. Our election process has become largely determined by personality, polls, PACS, and patronage rather than by the best qualified and committed to responsibility and accountability to the electorate. The gift of service has been sacrificed to a self-serving attitude of “What’s in it for me?” Even the church, called to be God’s servant people, often gets caught up in status, power, and appearances that produce a self-serving counterfeit of faith practice which fools no one except ourselves.

Of course, this is not a new phenomenon – it’s a human characteristic in all ages. We have a clear propensity to take for ourselves much more readily than we give of ourselves to God and especially to others. This deceitful desire to play God and to have control, power and authority has continued to tear apart human relationships, communities, and nations. It is what makes the way of divine grace, forgiveness, and love continually crucial in the renewal of life and relationships as demonstrated in Jesus Christ’s way of life, sacrificial death, and renewal to life and hope through resurrection.

In our Gospel text this morning, Jesus is teaching and also observing in the Temple in Jerusalem. (Read Mark 12: 38-44) The contrast demonstrated in this passage is the difference between pretense, image, “smoke and mirrors” if you will, and an uncomplicated genuine life of faith.

I must admit to you that I had some very uncomfortable moments in preparing this sermon because the application is just as potent in our day. I stand before you as a present-day parallel of the “teacher of the Law” – in my flowing robe describing a status, with a doctoral degree, standing high in this pulpit – all trappings that say nothing about my intentions and faith actions. How easy it can be to deceive oneself and misuse or abuse a divine calling. For this very reason I will try to be fair to the scribes as they really are not any different than you or me.

In this particular sequence Jesus has finished a discussion with one of the scribes about the first and second commandments. The first is: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (v.29-31) The scribe agrees that these behaviors are much more important than the whole ritual system through which these values of forgiveness and relationship were represented.

Jesus continues in another discourse about the Messiah, the hope of Israel, (v.35-37) with his disciples and followers. They are all common people, not sophisticated in terms of education or theology. They like him because he talks “straight” to them from observable everyday life. In this instance, he gives his followers a warning about religious appearance and contrasting faith process. He describes how our own needs of self-image and esteem can get in the way of our faith perspective. Using some scribes as examples, he focuses on outward appearances of importance and piety, yet in their role as the Jerusalem Housing Authority increasing their wealth and importance, taking advantage of solitary widow’s hospitality and legacies under the guise of charity. They receive the greater condemnation because they use the name of God to mask what they are doing.

William Sloane Coffin described this well when he wrote, “I think disguise is the essence of evil. Doing an evil thing doesn’t make a person evil. But calling the evil good, believing the disguise – that’s when real trouble begins. And if the disguise is the essence of evil, there is surely no better disguise than the cloak of religious piety. Never do people do evil so cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.”

The issue raised here for both clergy and everyone as members of the community of faith and the priesthood of believers is crucial in our life together.. Jesus warns us to be careful about our desire for prominence and control, of seeing our leadership role or ministry as a right rather than as an opportunity to serve God and neighbor.

The story is told of a monk, a very holy man, who was sent to take up office as an 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 dishes and did the most menial tasks. It was only when the bishop arrived some time later that the mistake was discovered and the humble monk took up his true position.

Jesus also advises against the use of religious connection for self-gain or self-advancement. Theologian William Barclay puts it simply: “Christ’s words stand as a warning to all who are in the church for what they can get out of it and not for what they can put into it.”

In stark contrast, Jesus shares his observation of what uncomplicated genuine faith is. He sits and watches as people place their voluntary offerings in the receptacles where monetary offerings are deposited for the daily sacrifices and the operating expenses of the Temple. Many well-to-do people put in large sums, some with great flourish.. In the midst of all these offerings, he spots a poor widow putting in two small copper coins called leptons – “thin ones” – the smallest of all coins. He calls his disciples over and highlights for them the differences in the way people respond to divine love.

You will notice, first of all, that there is no denunciation of gifts that come out of surplus or abundance. Maybe some gave to impress others around them, but certainly not all. We too give for many different reasons: out of a degree of gratitude, or to recognize God as the most important factor in our lives, or to get a tax write-off because we would rather give it to the work of the church than to the IRS, or perhaps for all these reasons.

But Jesus highlights this poor widow’s offering as an example of giving her all in response to her God. It was more important than eating because it was her daily food ration

to survive. In the way of God's kingdom, it is the world's mightiest financial transaction, where genuine giving based on love is measured in relation to what is left, not on the amount. Her love for her God has lifted her offering from the routine to the sacrificial. You know she could have rationalized and justified withholding these small coins. She could have said to herself:

- “What difference could a penny make? It's so small, it will not count.”
- “Let those give who can afford it – I really haven't got a penny to spare.”
- “No one will notice whether I drop anything in or not.”
- “Those rabbis never pay any attention to me, and I don't care for things that are happening in the Temple.”

We all know these and other responses. Jesus' recognition of her gift destroys any such excuses. In effect, what he affirms is to God no gift of love is too small to count, nor can any life be excused from the grace and responsibility of sharing. Truly “man looks upon the outward appearance, but God looks upon the heart.” Her gift reflects the sacrificial love that Christ would soon demonstrate in giving his life that she and his followers, and you and I, might have new life based on his redeeming and transforming love.

This text so often is used as a call for faithful stewardship and that is certainly one dimension. But this passage means so much more. It speaks to the Christian follower's entire life of faith. This widow's connection with God's love was through her worship in the Temple, the teaching and ministries which impacted her faith, and the relationships she had established which gave life meaning. She well may have experienced disappointment in the way different rabbis conducted worship or cared for the temple congregation. Perhaps she perceived hypocrisy in their words not matching their actions. She could have stopped going to worship because the leadership was far from perfect. Yet, it's in the congregation that she is connected with God and she chooses to follow the divine way which makes her life fuller and richer despite her poverty. She demonstrates “Loving the Lord her God with all her heart, her soul, her mind, and strength” and “to love her neighbor as she loved herself.” She had no need to judge the scribes or the others who gave their offerings. She knew God's forgiveness and transforming hope. God's faithfulness was all she needed.

Would that we could have the same growing faith in response to God's faithfulness to us. Surely, if God has forgiven us, how can we not forgive one another; if God loves us, how can we not love one another despite our differences and failures as the sinners we are; if God has reconciled us in Christ, how can we not be reconciled with one another; if God has given sacrificially to us, how can we not give of ourselves to others?

In the recent incident where five Amish school girls were killed in Pennsylvania, people were amazed by the forgiveness expressed by the Amish community toward the deranged killer and his family – they attended his funeral as well as their own children's. They set up a fund to support that man's family. In an open letter to the Amish community, Marie Roberts, the widow of Charles Roberts, states, “Your love for our family has helped provide the healing we so desperately need. Gifts you've given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe. Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you.” The Amish

community is not perfect by any means but they practice forgiveness. I would say this to any gathered here including myself, Has someone been cruel to you? Has someone hurt you deeply? Maybe you think there's no way you could ever forgive that person. On your own strength you probably can't. But you can ask Christ to give you his forgiveness. You can ask for his help. Let the power of his forgiveness flow through you. Let his gracious spirit be your spirit. That's how our faith works. We recognize our need for forgiveness, we accept God's gracious gift of forgiveness, and then we pass it on. We pass the forgiveness to others.

The widow in this account needed no pretense no "smoke and mirrors" to impress others. She was simply transparent and her faith in God sustained her and made her rich in spirit as she worshipped in the Temple congregation. The Scripture's praise of life together under the word is "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for sisters and brothers to dwell together in unity." We dwell together through Christ who alone is our unity. Through him alone do we have access to one another, joy in one another, and fellowship with one another. May God make this a reality in each of our lives in this community of faith called Fairmount.

Amen

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