***COUNTING ACCOUNTABILITY***

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November 10, 2024

Texts: Psalm 127:1-2 and Mark 12:38-44

They are often called the Widow’s Mite – those two copper coins that Jesus saw the poor woman drop into the temple treasury. Two copper coins aren’t much – they are worth only a penny according to Mark. And yet, says Jesus, they amount to more than those large sums that rich people put in. Why? Because she gave all she had, while they gave out of their excess. She gave from her heart; they gave from their leftovers. It is a popular theme in stewardship season: be like the poor woman who gave all she had rather than the rich folk who gave something less than their all. That message should resonate with us who profess to love God with all that we are – heart, mind, soul, strength, and wallet! Some years ago, we had a capital campaign whose message echoed the lesson of the Widow’s Mite: *Equal sacrifice, not equal giving*! The idea is that we all have different gifts to share; what we should offer is the best we have to give, whatever that may be. It should spur us to reflect on our giving and how well it stacks up to that of the poor woman’s copper coins. But there may be something more that Jesus had in mind in bringing the poor woman’s gift to the attention of his disciples; that something is related to his warnings about the scribes, warnings he offered just moments before watching the woman drop her coins into the treasury.

“*Beware of the scribes*,” he told the large crowd that had gathered around him in the temple. It was a bold message to offer in the very site where the scribes were at work and wielded their power. *Beware, be on guard, watch out* – those seemed harsh words to offer for men, and they were all men, charged with religious responsibilities in the seat of religious power. The scribes were originally like attorneys – interpreters of the law and responsible for legal documents. But over time their power and influence expanded. As Robert Bryant describes them:

*Their financial acumen and literary prowess distinguished them as a class and made their associations with money, power, religion, and politics inevitable. After the exile and the Law’s firm establishment at the core of Israel’s life, scribes gained further prominence as interpreters and teachers of God’s Law. Unfortunately, not all scribes exercised their office faithfully*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

*Beware of the scribes* spoke to the dangers inherent in the work of those unfaithful scribes. As Jesus described them, they were hypocrites who wore the signs of their office like banners. They wallowed in the people’s admiration and cherished the benefits of their office – the best seats in the house, the places of honor at the banquets. They were impressed by the eloquence of their own prayers, by the power they held, and by the high regard in which they were held by the people. Yet they would be the first to assure you that of their many great qualities, humility was at the top of the list!

*Beware of the scribes*, says Jesus. Beware of them, not only because they are hypocrites and have corrupted the faith they interpret for others. Beware of them for they devour widows’ houses. They who were charged with caring for the poor and outcast were instead preying upon them. In those days widows had no power and limited means of survival. They were often poor and dependent upon others. The widows upon whom these scribes preyed were poor women who had little power and few resources to begin with, and the scribes left them with less!

One of the last cases I handled in my law practice before heading off to seminary was representing an elderly woman who had been pressured into giving up her life savings by a church she was attending. The people in the church were very attentive to her; they visited and were kind, but they constantly urged her to make larger gifts to the church. The pastor and elders came to speak with her about making such gifts, and eventually she did. Her children came to me when they found that she had given away $78,000 which was most of her savings; at about the same time, a boat that had been her husband’s had disappeared from her driveway. The children suspected that the church had taken advantage of their mother’s frail state, and as it turned out, they had every reason to be suspicious!

When I contacted the pastor of the church, he confirmed that the woman had indeed given all that money to the church; oddly the church was holding it in a separate account, perhaps suspecting that someone might come asking about it. The boat too was in their possession, sitting on its trailer in the minister’s driveway. It was a gift, he said at first, before suggesting that he was just holding it for safekeeping. They claimed that all the monies and boat had been freely given by the woman without any pressure, but it was not long before all the monies had been returned and the boat voluntarily surrendered. Beware the scribes, Jesus said. Beware indeed!

It was immediately after the warning about such unscrupulous scribes that Jesus pointed out to the disciples the poor woman dropping her two copper coins into the temple treasury. And I wonder if Jesus was emphasizing his warning by bringing her example to their attention. Both rich and poor made their gifts, entrusting them to the scribes, priests, and elders in the temple. They gave them to God’s glory and while the poor woman’s gift surpassed those of the rich folk because of its consequence for her life, it also highlighted the responsibility of the scribes as stewards of her gift, for she had given them all she had to live on. The scribes were charged with caring for the orphan and widow, for the poor and struggling, for those who could not care for themselves, yet they were enriching themselves at the expense of the very people for whom they were to care. The prophet Isaiah had condemned such actions in Israel centuries before with these words:

*The Lord enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people:*

*It is you who have devoured the vineyard;*

*the spoil of the poor is in your houses.*

*What do you mean by crushing my people,*

*by grinding the face of the poor?*

*says the Lord God of hosts. (Isaiah 3:14-15)*

Jesus’ warning about the scribes echoes those words of Isaiah, and to his words of caution Roger Nishioka offers this stark analysis:

*The scribes are like leeches on the faithful, benefiting from a religious system that allows poor widows to sacrifice what little they have. We should be outraged by any system that appropriates the property of the poor and the near-destitute in order to perpetuate wealth for the elite.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

Some of you will recall there was such outrage some years ago when Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker were found to have raked in millions of dollars in donations, many from elderly folks who could little afford it, and used them to enrich themselves, including the purchase of an air-conditioned doghouse! I remember a TV evangelist in Philadelphia who solicited donations from his viewers for which they could receive a picture of Jesus on the throne of heaven with Peter on one side and the TV evangelist on the other! People mailed in their gifts even as many of them struggled to get by day-to-day. By contrast Pope Francis declined to live in the lavish apartment offered to him at the Vatican, choosing instead a simple room. “Beware of the scribes!” says Jesus. Beware too of the modern scribes who take advantage of the poor to enrich themselves.

We should not think that such a warning is limited only to those who sit in gilded houses with electric dog polishers and gasoline-powered turtle neck sweaters, to borrow an image from Steve Martin. As the Church, we too bear responsibility for stewardship of the gifts entrusted to our care; that is a responsibility we share as a Covenant community. We have been blessed with gifts from prior generations and from this generation, and we are charged to use those gifts responsibly to fulfill Christ’s mission in the world. Like the scribes in the first century, we are charged with caring for the poor in our midst as instruments of God’s grace and to do so with humility and love.

“*Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain*,” sings the psalmist. That applies to this house of the Lord that we have built. It is built for the Lord’s good purposes, not our own. That is why we share our space with the community in so many ways; it is why we invite mission groups to stay here in the course of their travels or work; it is why we have a preschool that shares God’s love with children in our community. This house is built to God’s glory and to be used for God’s good purposes so that we are the instruments by which God builds lives within these walls and beyond. Anything less is building in vain! It is why Outreach is such a significant part of our budget, for together we seek to be faithful stewards of all God’s gifts in order to live into those Great Ends of the Church to which we are called:

*the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;*

*the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God,*

*the maintenance of divine worship;*

*the preservation of the truth;*

*the promotion of social righteousness;*

*and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.*

That last Great End calls us to live and serve together so that the world may look at us and get a glimpse of what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like. It is a big responsibility, but also a great blessing and opportunity! For we are called to be the Church who Jesus praises with the words, *well done good and faithful servants*, rather than the scribes of whom Jesus warns, “*Beware!*” In that good work, may God bless us – bless us and those we serve, one and all! Amen

1. Robert A. Bryant, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol.4, Westminster John Knox Press:2009, p.287 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Roger Nishioka, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol.4, Westminster John Knox Press:2009, p.286 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)