**24 Pentecost Nov 11 2012, Mark 12:38-44, The Rev. Mary S. Trainor**

Picture this scene in your mind: an old-time vaudeville melodrama, with a villain (who has a black hat and a well-waxed handle-bar mustache, which he twirls while hatching an evil scheme). The audience loves to hate the villain, hissing and booing, throwing peanuts at him. And when the heroine comes out on the stage, the audience sighs, "**aw**" with sympathy, when they see her. At first glance, today’s Gospel story seems like one of those old-time melodramas. The villains in the Gospel are the scribes, easy to hate because they swagger around in their fine robes, drawing attention to themselves, not caring about the needs of others. Then there’s the poor widow, the heroine, the bag lady barely scraping by, yet offering what she has to God. Most of us are not like either of these extremes: the villain scribes or the destitute widow. So we might be tempted to not really get engaged in this lesson as we don't identify with either. But on closer examination, we see aspects of these people in us. We can learn from this lesson: this is what Jesus wants.

Jesus said "***beware***" of the scribes, for they did things, "***for the sake of appearances***" -- isn't this so contemporary? Our culture even rewards self-absorbed, self-conscious, appearance-oriented people. The culture teaches us to try to impress others with what we say or do, how we look, our job titles or our education -- that is how you get ahead! Scribes were part of the religious establishment. They were leaders in Israel, part of the intellectual elite. The scribes used their power to get more and more; the importance of their position got to them. And Jesus was calling them out on this. The bible says*, humans* ***"look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks upon the heart"* (**1Sam.16:7). To the Lord, it's what is going on in our hearts and souls that counts.

I have never forgotten a true story from the book, City of Joy, about life in Calcutta, India. The author tells of a priest there who would visit a woman in his congregation each week, to give her the current prayer list from the church; her ministry was prayer. In fact, she spent most of her life in prayer. The woman was overjoyed each week to greet the priest. When he got there, he would share with her the list of those in need of intercessory prayer (one name and intention at a time). Each week, she would memorize the prayer list. The interesting thing is that this woman, a prayer warrior for the church, had the outward appearance that would make people turn away. In fact, she never went out of her home because she was badly disfigured from leprosy. She was also blind and dirt poor (living in squalor). Yet, she had a rich and fulfilling life in spite of all of this -- because she knew she was a person of value, she knew she was using her gifts fully for the Lord's work. And, the priest reported that when he left her after his visit he realized that she ministered to him, that she shared the joy of the Lord with him.

The scribes in today's Gospel not only tried to impress others, but they were greedy. Certain scribes were legal trustees of a widow’s estate; they charged exorbitant fees for their services and even took the “***widows’ houses.***" To be widowed meant that you lived off of others; they were left with nothing. The widow in this story was like the homeless in our culture today: people who we do not really want to see, because they are unsightly and make you feel bad to look at. Jesus intentionally was people watching here - and his vantage point was at the temple, watching people put their donations into the alms basin. People could not see him watching, but He saw them. Jesus particularly noticed her, and wanted the disciples (and us) to notice her too. We see the widow through the eyes of Jesus, who wants us to learn from her--especially in contrast to the scribes. Jesus sat and watched as the woman gave all that she had; it was as though she was saying to God by her action “**here I am, all of me.”** This is not about money, this is about her relationship with God, and ours too. She is living out the first commandment from last week's Gospel: "***love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength;"*** she is not holding back anything of herself from God.

You see, the widow is living her life from a place of abundance: the abundance of God and His love. This is in contrast to the scribes who are living with themselves at the center, focused on wanting more material things and power instead of more of God. When we go forward trusting fully in God, we naturally have an "abundance mentality" as opposed to a "scarcity mentality." There was a lot that the widow didn't have, but she knew she had God's love. She knew that made her rich. So it is from this place of abundance that the widow is functioning, that the woman with leprosy in India is functioning. Jesus wants us to live that way too!

There was a man who was cleaning at work one Friday afternoon when he noticed an unopened envelope on his desk with his name on it. He opened it; to his shock it was a notice of being terminated, being laid-off from his job. After all the years he had given to his company, he became filled with resentment, and slumped in his chair thinking of all the terrible things that were going to happen to him ("I'll have to sell my house; What will others think? I'm useless."). Then, he noticed a spider on his desk, brushed it off, but then watched it. He was amazed as the tiny creature spun a strand to swing itself in safety to the floor. He pondered: **"If this tiny creature could draw forth the resources to meet its emergency, why can't I do the same? After all, I have God."** So, he moved from the anxiety of what he lacked to the abundance of what God had given him. He thought: "My security is not in my job or in my money or in my house but in my connection with God who has seen me through all circumstances in my life. They might take me off the payroll, but no one can take away the fullness of God in my life." This man had earlier been interested in writing, but had forgotten about it! Here was the opportunity before him. He thanked God for this new door open before him and left the office with an enthusiasm that surprised even himself. Now he didn't become a financial giant overnight from his writing, but more importantly he had a new found faith in the abundance of God and His need to trust in God.

We have, all around, folks who need to know the abundance of God's love: teens who are bullied, people who are down because their outward appearance is judged harshly by society, people ashamed because they can't pay their bills, jobless people who don't recognize that they have untapped gifts and talents, and people who feel they don't really matter. Today' Gospel calls us to be people who live from the abundance of gifts God has given us, and then to go out into the world helping others to recognize that they matter, that they too are children of God. God has given us all that we need to do this. Will you choose to live from a place of God's abundance?

Let us close by praying together Prayer #38, For the Right Use of God's Gifts, on p. 817 of the Book of Common Prayer. **Almighty God, whose loving hand hath given us all that we possess: Grant us grace that we may honor thee with our substance, and remembering the account which we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of thy bounty, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**