

Proper 27B 2018 Sermon

Mark 12:38-44

As Jesus taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

In last week’s Gospel reading, Jesus said that the two Greatest Commandments are to love God with all one’s heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Jesus himself *embodies* this double commandment to love God and neighbor: he lives a life in congruity with what he preaches and teaches. He has integrity of heart, mind, speech, and action; and he is therefore able to clearly see when *others* do **not** have such integrity – do not (to use the words of our Prayer Book) “show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith.”¹ Jesus’ most consistent criticism of the Pharisees, scribes, and Sadducees in the Gospels is that they are hypocrites. They make an outward show of being pious, while in reality, they are only looking out for themselves. The Gospel writers often paint the scribes and Pharisees as *so* hypocritical as to be almost caricatures of evil; with the unfortunate result that few of us, if any, find them in the least bit sympathetic or relatable.

Fr. John Shea, who has consulted with many Catholic Health Care systems about the ethics of health care, raises the question of whether the scribes and Pharisees are really **hypocrites**, in the *technical* sense of that word, or whether they exhibit what he calls “value discrepancy.” Hypocrisy, as Dr. Shea defines it, “is a **conscious** deception for the purposes of promoting and protecting yourself. Value discrepancy [on the other hand] is an **unconscious** lack of integration. For example, a husband **says** he loves his wife, but he talks only about himself and never inquires about her feelings... **Hypocrisy** would be: he *tells* her he loves her but in his heart he does **not**, and his maintaining this pretense in some way benefits him. Value discrepancy [on the other hand, would be]: he **really** loves her, but he has not broken old self-serving tapes and learned how to attentively listen to another [person, so he lacks the integration of his love with his actions and words.] The [appropriate] response to *hypocrisy* is prophetic denunciation; the [appropriate] response to *value discrepancy* is awareness and improvement.

“Value discrepancy often shows up in organizational life,” Fr. Shea continues. “...The hospitals [with which I consult] and the larger systems of which they are a part are values driven. There are mission statements where values such as ‘compassion,’ ‘respect,’ ‘stewardship,’ ‘equality,’ etc. are spelled out. [You and I have seen these very words on computer screens at St. Thomas More Hospital, or posted on the walls of the hospital.] These values are *supposed* to permeate the organization and penetrate all its operations.

“However, if you talk to an individual or a particular group,” Fr. Shea notes, “they may point to a policy or a behavior that directly contradicts the values. If they are angry about this discrepancy, they may even suggest hypocrisy. They may say that the people on top do not *really* believe in respect, but [rather this virtuous-sounding] rhetoric ‘keeps the troops happy’—while management does contradictory things for their own promotion.

“But more often than not,” Dr. Shea explains, “the value discrepancy is not an evil strategy. It is simply a failure of integration, and there are many reasons for it—some of them quite [understandable]: Things grew too fast. Policies were created out of expediency rather than values. Leaders caved in to different pressure groups. The *cultural* values of business and organizational life that most executives have unconsciously internalized trumped the stated values. It happened by not being mindful. [Shown the discrepancy, many executives would likely admit,] ‘Now that we see it, we recognize we are not who we say we are.’

“Although sometimes value discrepancies are blatant,” Fr. Shea notes, “often they are difficult to spot. This is especially true if the discrepancies are longstanding ways of acting and obligations that are taken for granted. Only thoughtful and highly integrated people notice the gap between what is preached and what is practiced—which brings us to Jesus, the widow, and the temple treasury.”²

Now, Fr. Shea agrees with those Biblical scholars who say that the widow in our Gospel puts into the Treasury “everything she has, all she has to live on” because the Temple system leads her to believe that she is *obligated* to do so. Dr. Shea writes: “It is difficult to see the exploitation of the widow because Temple theology and policy is well established. The Law obliges **all** to support the Temple. Personal piety *builds* on that law... Donating is a sign of one’s sincerity and commitment. To give to God’s House is to give to God. In fact, all you *have* comes from God, and to give it back is an act of vibrant faith. Do the priests and scribes profit from this? They do, but that is incidental. This is about the total claim faith makes on true believers. The manifest objective of this way of thinking is to support the House of the God of Israel.

“However, the latent *functioning* of this theology and practice is another matter. God’s [ceaseless] concern [throughout the Hebrew Bible] has been for the poor and the vulnerable. This revelation *preceded* the Temple and was one of the driving forces of the Exodus from Egypt. No Temple policy should generate the

expectation that the vulnerable should make themselves *more* vulnerable, and no widow should be *allowed* to impoverish herself. The house of [God, who is] the ‘Father of orphans and protector of widows’ (Ps 68:5), does not devour the houses of widows. The teaching of Jesus reveals this value discrepancy.”² (unquote)

My friends, I find this distinction between hypocrisy and “value discrepancy” to be very insightful *and* helpful! As we all know, “hypocrisy” is a “loaded” word, and “hypocrite!” is an epithet when it is used against another person. The very use of these words becomes divisive and polarizing. And none of *us* wants to accept that *we* might be a hypocrite, so we naturally deny that the word applies to us, and therefore do not relate at all to the scribes and Pharisees in the Gospels. To speak, instead, of *unconscious* “value discrepancy” is not only truer to what is actually happening in most instances; it is also much less charged and polarizing, and therefore allows for a less defensive assessment of any lack of integrity between professed values and actual behavior, with the result that there is a greater chance that change can occur both within ourselves and others.

I truly believe that Fr. Shea’s experience with health care organizations is also true of much of our society and institutions. When the unconscious, **implicit** values by which we live out our daily lives *contradict* our **professed** values, most of us aren’t even aware of it. Several sermons ago, I told of a revelation that I had while shopping in the produce department at Walmart. I was treated with unusual kindness and thoughtful, helpful service by a young produce clerk; and it suddenly came to my awareness that I had absorbed our society’s tacit belief that what makes a company great is its financial success: its yearly profit, or its stock price. We all hear or read about it when a company’s quarterly profit report is announced, with the corresponding increase or decrease in its stock price; and we unconsciously use those criteria to judge the company. But what I realized that day with the young clerk in the produce department was that my **true** values regarding what makes a company great have nothing to do with profit and loss balance sheets or the company’s stock price or their low prices or whether they perform better than their competitors. When I am in touch with my **true** values, I realize that a great company is a company whose employees treat their customers with thoughtfulness, kindness, respect, and helpfulness.

And, my friends, we can draw this **out** of people, draw out from them their better angels! In last week’s sermon, I mentioned the comedian Michael Junior, who says that his “big break” came when, rather than trying to **get** laughs from people, he saw his goal as *giving* people the **opportunity** to laugh. Well, you and I can give employees in retail stores the opportunity to be helpful and kind – which ends up blessing us all!

My friends, we are surrounded by – and we breathe, 24/7 – the very air of our society’s *implicit* values, which are often *not* our own **core** values, not **Christian** values. And other people, whom we might be quick to criticize, (like members of the “other” political party, for instance) likely have that *same* problem: they are

not behaving according to their *true* values. But they aren't **hypocrites!** Rather, they are unconsciously caught in some value discrepancy.

For instance: I wonder if many of the Christians who profess to believe in the Bible as the literal word of God yet do not see immigrants as our neighbors have ever seriously considered that just a few verses following God's commandment in Leviticus to "Love your neighbor as yourself," God says this to the people: "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the **citizen** among you; you shall love the alien as yourself..."³ To what degree are these "Bible-believing Christians" experiencing unconscious value discrepancy, living by the tacit values of society's increasing nationalism and protectionism, while the Bible they profess to be the bedrock source of their values says that the alien shall be as a citizen and we are to love the alien as ourself? Now, let me be quick to admit that I am no better when it comes to my *own* value discrepancies, as my revelation in Walmart proved to me; I had not been consciously aware of my true values.

What is the answer to our value discrepancies? I think Jesus *shows* us the answer in today's Gospel: it is awareness, mindfulness. *Twice* in this Gospel, he calls to his disciples' awareness something that they had not noticed. First, he says, "Beware of the scribes;" but the actual word in the Greek is the simple word "to see." "See the scribes," he is saying; "Behold! Notice what they are doing!" I doubt the disciples would have *ever* noticed how the scribes were polishing their egos had Jesus not brought it to their attention. I doubt the scribes themselves were conscious of what they were doing! In the second instance, I doubt that the disciples would have noticed this poor widow, had Jesus not brought her to their attention. Nor did the scribes notice her, either. But **Jesus** notices. And as Fr. Shea says, the [appropriate] response to value discrepancy is *awareness* – and then improvement.

Lord God, make us more aware of our value discrepancies, and move us to live lives of greater integrity and wholeness.

AMEN

¹ *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 224, Collect for Easter 2

² John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, pp. 268-269

³ Leviticus 19:33-34