

Sermon: Where Our Problem Lies**Scripture: Mark 12:38-44****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: November 8, 2009**

I've read of late some articles and had some conversations that have centered around criticism of organized religion which has got me thinking. Obviously, I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing as a pastor of a Christian church if I didn't disagree with those who suggest that religion and deep religious commitment is one if not THE source of violence and discord in the world. I just can't accept the suggestion, and again this won't come as a surprise to you I'm sure, that somehow if we could stop our "God delusion", as Richard Dawkins puts it, and committing ourselves to particular religions that we would then stop killing each other and instead love and care for one another.

I don't believe that the problem lies in our religions, our faith, or our scriptures but rather the problem lies within our fallen humanness. Haven't those nations and their leaders around the world that swore off religion like Stalin, Lenin, and Mao and others over the last century already demonstrated that despotism and oppression of others can be as effectively accomplished without any use of God and the claim of doing God's will. H. Allen Orr, a professor of biology at the University of Rochester, remarked that the 20th century was an experiment in secularism that produced secular evil, responsible for the unprecedented murder of more than 100 million.

And I think our media fosters such an idea that the problem is one of religion. Did you hear the reports this week of the terrible shootings at the military base in Texas? How long was it before it was proclaimed that the shooter was Muslim? I heard it almost immediately as the central defining feature of the man. Why does that matter, that he was Muslim? A *Muslim* shot American soldiers. And that is more news worthy and will stick in the minds of the masses, I guarantee you, more than the fact that he was a military man. More than "this violence arose out of someone committed to the inherently violent military industrial complex", is the lesson that this violence arose out of Islam! Really? Did his commitment to an organized religion and his following of the will of God lead him to do what he did or was it more likely something of his own sickness, rage, psychosis or whatever. Religion, I think, at times gets a bad rap and I say this as

someone who really struggles with the loudest Christian voices in our country and what they stand for.

I personally think it's tragic that gay marriage was banned in Maine and that there were Christian groups that were pumping money into the opposition of it, but I do not believe at all that claiming the scriptures as holy and being committed to Christ or being a devout Christian necessarily leads to such a conclusion. I do not believe that organized religion – be it Christianity or Islam or Mormonism – is the source for such bigotry any more than I would believe that astronomy and physics is the source of the universe. The source of such bigotry, claiming ourselves as better and more deserving than others and working the system so that it favor us and disfavors those who are not like us, is a profoundly deep dynamic set within the human condition, which our scriptures, in fact, take great pains to reveal to us! Not that we listen very well!

Today's scripture is a case in point. First let me just acknowledge how hugely ironic it is to be up here in my long robe sitting in the best seat in the house while I read this scripture where Jesus says “beware of the Pharisees that like to walk around in long robes and like to have the best seats in the synagogue”! ay yayah! But look at this scripture for a moment with me so that we really hear what is going on. I read a theologian this week who made a great point about this passage. Often we can hear this read and explain it as Jesus affirming the widow's offering of all she had to the temple. “This poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box... for she gave all she had to live on!” But actually there is nothing in the scripture that suggests Jesus is admiring her offering. In fact he precedes his description of what she is giving to the temple with these words about the Pharisees who “like to walk around in their long robes and sit in places of honor while they rob widows' houses!” And only then does he say look at that woman who is giving all she has to the temple! It sure seems that if anything Jesus is dismayed by what she is doing rather than admiring it. “Look she is giving to the temple everything she has to live on!” This is a perfect example of how the keepers of the temple are devouring widows' houses – they are telling her to give everything she has and she already has nothing, while they sit in their positions of wealth and might and receive more than they give! Do you hear it? Jesus, in typical form, is not mincing words here at all. He is condemning those in power – in this

instance it is the religious leaders – for using religion for their own gain and power and position at the expense of others, like this poor widow. The figure upon whom we have built our religion warns us over and over and over again against the perils of using religion for our ends instead of God's. We still do it of course but that's the human being taking whatever it can get its hands on and turning it towards selfish ends rather than corporate/communal uplift.

But let me be clear, I don't think that Jesus has it out for religion in general, Jesus has it out for those who use religion for their own credit and towards their own ends instead of using religion as it should be used which is to give God the credit and towards God's ends.

Of course the problem comes when some people say, for instance, that God's ends are that marriage be sacrosanct between a man and woman while others say God's ends are ultimately that some not be favored in society over and above others. But the problem is not God or religion per se but the way human beings use it, nor can the problem possibly be solved by eliminating God or religion from the equation. There will still be this strangely ingrained tendency within us as human beings to justify and protect and lift ourselves over others.

Someone wrote me an email this week telling me that they went to church last weekend down in the South at a church that they didn't know was so conservative and had to listen to railings against this or that and it made them so appreciate our church's approach and my ministry and the way I preach. And I sat in my office in the glow of that lovely email thinking about those intolerant misguided Christians down there and pondering my own rightness and how this person really was correct to appreciate me and our church...

And there I was in that familiar fallen, maybe less-than-human place where my value, my worth was in that moment established over and against others. Human brokenness leads us fundamentally and continually to a place of saying "I Am... because I am not them". The grace of God leads us to a place of saying "I am because God has made me, because God has fearfully and wonderfully knit me in my mother's womb (as the psalmist would say)". That and that alone is what my being is dependent upon AND such is true of everyone else in this most amazing world. The scriptures, if you read them

closely, reveal both of those things – that we are too often in the business of justifying and establishing ourselves over and against others or at the expense of others and that we are invited to rest in our being established in the heart of the Creator. If we throw out the scriptures, throw out religion, throw out our certainly-limited human efforts to know and love God, then I'm afraid we would be discarding the one bulwark we have against human competition and rivalry and conflict running amuck. Far from being the source of conflict and violence, I wonder if religion, for as much trouble as it causes, is the one human institution that holds our human violence in check. May God bless our efforts to live faithfully and lovingly within our most amazing and diverse human family....