

“Beware!”- Mark 12:38 - 44  
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“Beware!” And you thought Halloween was over.  
Beware!  
That’s what Jesus tells us in our passage for today.  
Beware of long robe wearin’ religious leaders!

Wait a second....(looking at my robe).

In my work as chaplain with seniors at a long term care facility called Highland Hills--I meet some of the most amazing people, and I learn a lot about their experiences of being an elderly person in our society. One experience they all share in common: an incessant number of solicitations from any number of types of solicitors--insurance, extended car warranties (most have given up their vehicles), miracle hearing aids--”what’d you say?”, and scammers using any variety of tactics--you know the type.

And this to a very vulnerable population. But, they aren’t suckers. Most attempts fail. But, we do hear from time to time about someone who has been “dupped.” It’s terrible.

Beware of the solicitors! Jesus might say!

Sometimes I like to do thought exercises, and flip the script. What if, what if, when a solicitor called, what they were offering really *was* in the best interest of the recipient?! What if it was impossible, due to law, no due to human nature, to only offer a product or service or whatever to someone which was in fact in their best interest. There are experts out there, they know what they are peddling, and there really are things that can improve our lives....

What if we could only act in ways that benefit others, all of us?  
And I think to myself, what a wonderful world that might be!

It’s kind of like actor Jim Carey’s character in the movie *Lair Lair*. A liar, and a terrible dad who perpetually lets down his son, he’s innocently cursed by his son, and can no longer lie. He can only tell the truth! Which puts him in a really difficult situation, because he can’t get away with his shenanigans any longer.

Yea, what if we could only tell the truth to one another!

And I think to myself, what a wonderful world that might be!

But, let’s come back down to earth. We know our reality.

Far from only doing in the best interest of others, it seems most often we do what is in our best interest.

Far from only telling the truth, it seems there are plenty of people out there willing to tell blatant lies--rationalizing, I suppose. that the ends justify the means.

And so we’re left with a highly dubious society. Wondering Who can we trust?

I was standing behind the bleachers at a football game across the street a few Fridays ago, Suddenly, a young boy, 8-9 years old--ran so fast darting to and fro to avoid the bystanders--he almost ran into me. He ended up out of breath before an older gentleman and gets out:

“Grandpa, my mom said you’re supposed to take me home after the game. ”

The grandpa’s response was playful, “She did, Are you sure you can trust me?”

The boy seemed confused. “Yeah...?” he said.

Who can we trust? Certainly grandparents can be trusted, right Grammie?

I remember sitting with my father a few years ago. He was doing his end of the year giving. We were looking at charitable organizations. And after some time going back and forth about this one or that one, he said to me, “I have a hard time giving away money because I just don’t know if I can trust the recipient.”

Who can we trust? Certainly those who work in charity can be trusted, right?!

What about Clergy? Religious leaders? Religious institutions?

Surely we can trust them and what they represent, right!

Beware! Says a voice from 2000 years ago!

I find this passage so fascinating, in and of itself. But, even moreso as it is the gospel for today’s lectionary on what happens to be my first Sunday serving this congregation in my role as interim pastor.

Beware! Of course, I was going to wear a robe!

*And*, Judy told me quickly after our agreement that it was Stewardship season and my first task was going to be reminding, encouraging, compelling people to give!

God loves the cheerful giver! ... Beware!

But it’s a fascinating passage even outside of those themes as we partner together.

Let’s spend a little time digging in and then we’ll call it good for today so we can hang out with one another--we have lots of people who have yet to meet, friends of the Ness’s and Topples from over our years living in this community who’ve never set foot inside the beautiful green door today and members and participants of this congregation.

Mark 12 is a series of encounters between Jesus and the religious leaders--Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees, and scribes, oh my,--all of them step into the ring to challenge the *sensei*.

There is one scribe who actually seems to have a little more amenable approach than the others--he’s the one who prompts Jesus to teach: Love the Lord your God with all.. And love your neighbor as yourself!

The scribe and Jesus seem to be getting along quite well, until moments later Jesus says,

Beware of these long robe wearin’ scribes, always taking the best seats at the dinner party, with their long big-word prayers!

“Beware!” Why? “They devour widow’s houses!”

They devour widow’s houses....let’s come back to that

Because next we see Jesus sitting on a perch. He can see people putting money into the treasury of the synagogue. He didn’t need binoculars to see there were well to do people who gave large sums... and then he then sees a woman who gives two copper coins.

“Hey guys,” he says to his disciples...”come check this out...”.

“See that widow, watch her.”

We can envision stooped over, head covered, elderly woman maybe ambling along with a cane. But, in all likelihood she was much much younger than we picture, folks didn’t live long back then-- Mary the mother of Jesus may have been a widow in her late 20s.

But she is a widow, Mark makes clear, who not so discreetly, puts in her two copper coins.

I love how Mark adds that adjective, “small” to describe the copper coins just to reiterate how little this was that she was putting in: Two small copper coins is what this widow contributes.

And Mark tell us that these two small copper coins were “everything that she had, all she had to live on.” Wow.

How have we often heard this story of “the widow’s mite” interpreted?

My experience has been one in which the church has suggested that she is a giver *par excellence*.

Because of her example, all of us, especially the more affluent among us, should give more than we initially thought, give such that we should feel it at least a little bit.

I mean, consider the poor widow who gave everything in faith!

But really, it’s hard to tell if Jesus is condoning her action or not.

He certainly is citing and perhaps commending her action in contrast to the giving of the more affluent.

*And* he has been known to encourage people to give away everything. Just a few chapters earlier in Mark he tells someone, “sell everything and follow me...”

But, I don’t know...is Jesus approving of what’s going on with this widow and her actions and the temple practice of contributing to the treasury?

Back to the senior living community, Highland Hills. I sat with three widows in a bible study earlier this week looking at this passage. They are faithful, committed, sincere. I asked them, would any of you give away everything you had all you had to live on to your religious institution?

Unequivocally, they answered, ‘no’. Hmmm

So, does it make sense that Jesus is approving of this action of the widow in our story?

What was it he was saying earlier? Beware!!

Beware: they *devour* widow's houses....

Was this widow giving not because she was generous and trusting and faithful, but instead because she was compelled to give by the religious institution.

The very institution that was instituted to care for her, as poor widow, is instead, "Devouring her house."

Wait, what?

Institutions at their best function to carry out collective work that we can't do on our own. But it would seem in Jesus' day, as in ours, institutions, religious and secular, can lose their way.

The religious institution Jesus was laser focused on here was that of synagogue.

I asked a chatbot a question this week in preparation for this sermon

Who are the vulnerable the Hebrew Scriptures identify as needing the support and protection of the religious institution for their well being?

Well, here's the response (get Ruby to read it?):

The Hebrew Scriptures often highlight specific groups as vulnerable, frequently urging their protection and fair treatment within society. These categories of vulnerable people include:

1. **Widows** – Without the financial and social support typically provided by husbands in ancient times, widows were often vulnerable to poverty and exploitation. The Bible repeatedly commands care for them (e.g., Exodus 22:22-23, Deuteronomy 10:18).
2. **Orphans** – Children without parents were particularly susceptible to neglect and mistreatment. The Hebrew Scriptures emphasize their need for special care and justice (e.g., Psalm 82:3, Deuteronomy 24:17).
3. **Foreigners or Strangers** (often referred to as "sojourners") – People living outside their homeland lacked family support networks and legal rights. Scriptures stress the importance of treating foreigners justly and with compassion (e.g., Leviticus 19:33-34, Exodus 22:21).
4. **The Poor** – Those lacking material wealth or resources, often at the mercy of others for basic survival, are also seen as needing protection. Various laws in the Hebrew Scriptures encourage support and fair treatment of the poor (e.g., Proverbs 14:31, Deuteronomy 15:7-11).
5. **The Sick and Disabled** – While less frequently categorized explicitly, people with physical or mental challenges are often grouped with other vulnerable populations in need of mercy and compassion (e.g., Leviticus 19:14).

These groups are consistently mentioned as deserving justice, compassion, and support, highlighting a social ethic of care and responsibility within the Hebrew Scriptures.

What' cha think? Can we trust a chatbot's answer?

Who was responsible for upholding and ensuring the religious institution was doing its job in this way?

Why, among other religious leaders, the scribes....they knew better than anyone as they dedicated their lives to writing the laws down day after day after day.

Beware! Beware of the scribes!

Who knows the role of the church better than anyone. Clergy, we would hope!

“Give to this ministry, and you will receive a blessing!”

Beware! Beware!!

I want to close with one last image. A thought exercise, again. A what if interpretation of this passage.

What if. What if, as we look at this scene of the poor widow giving her two small copper coins, giving everything she had, all she had to live on, what if she did do so *freely and willingly*.

What if she did so because the religious institution, did what it was instituted to do, acted in her best interest. What if she gave freely and willingly, because all her needs were met because somehow the religious institution and the society in which it functioned had the infrastructure necessary to care for *her*.

She had no need for the small copper coins, and she wanted to do her part to contribute to the good work that was taking place. It was her way of giving back, and she left that treasure feeling empowered and free.

What if...

In a season of stewardship, let us give, but let us be diligent about how gifts are used, used to further the work of caring for the most vulnerable among us. So when people think of this beautiful church on a hill with the green door, they think, that's an institution we can trust. That's an intuition with people who do good by others, the good work they are called to do as followers in the way of Jesus.

What if...May it be so. Amen and Amen.